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The Dance Studio

By Nicole Asselin

The judges have awarded "The Dance Studio" a special commendation for excellence in writing.

Rows of sleepy-faced girls file in
through the door like columns of pink
and black ants, their new pink ballet shoes
squeaking on the polished hardwood floors as
they line up at the barre.

The barre is cold and shocks their
warm inviting hands.
"Bend and stretch
plie and releve,"
the teacher calls out while the piano
plays a soft, lilting melody
punctuating each precise movement
of the bending legs.

The mirrors glint in
the morning sun
that's streaming through
the windows as the
dancers twist and turn
through the sunbeams
like flowers swaying in the breeze.

Hour after hour,
day after day,
week after week,
the rhythm and the practice
of "plie, releve"
are the heart
of dance,
home away from home,
the studio.

Blunted

By Alan Flamenhaft

The judges have awarded "Blunted" a special commendation for excellence in writing.

In thinking back on the important events of my life, it's ironic that an event that should have been a blur to me is one of the most vivid. I was sixteen at the time, and that summer was amazing. No more riding around on bikes or hanging out around the Seven-Eleven; I was going places. I had just gotten my junior license, and the fact that I couldn't drive past nine didn't even faze the feeling of complete liberty. Being able to drive was the best—especially in upstate New York where there wasn't much to do without a car. However, there was a catch: responsibility. At this point in my life, I could barely spell responsibility, let alone comprehend the meaning of it. So basically, my parents handing over the keys to my very own black Honda Accord was the equivalent of taking someone from AA to a night at the bar. When it comes to driving, we are all programmed, or at least we should be. When we see the color green, we keep going, and when we see red, we come to a halt. However, yellow is thrown into the mix, and a decision has to be made to stop or speed up. This X-factor of sorts and others like it have altered people's lives indiscriminately, for better or worse, since the beginning of time. On that glorious Sunday afternoon, I chose to slow down for the yellow and stop.

It was only three weeks before school was about to start, and my parents had been arguing for a week straight. They wanted to attend my stepfather's college reunion in Ohio but couldn't agree on whether or not to leave me home alone for the weekend. It went back and forth for a while, and each time they decided one way or the other, I kept my reactions neutral so as not to ruin my chances. Eventually they decided to risk it and have a friend of the family check up on me now and then. At the time I really couldn't fathom their brave decision, nor did I care to. The point remained the same. For a whole weekend I had the place to myself! The possibilities were endless. I could partake of my deviant ways without having to sneak around my

parents. The first two nights were a lot of fun; all my friends came over and we partied. It wasn't over the top. I didn't let kids smoke inside the house, and nothing ended up trashed.

On Sunday morning I woke up and was in a state of straight denial. The weekend had gone by too fast, and I didn't want it to end. My parents had said they were coming home around three, but I was alert for a sneak attack. In hindsight, I wish they had done just that—seen beer cans everywhere and grounded me on the spot. In a rush to get out of the house, I called my friend, Corey, and we made plans to get some weed and go to the movies. I threw away all the beer cans and incriminating evidence faster than Mr. Clean himself. Then, I double-checked the whole house just to be certain I wouldn't get a 911-page in the movies because they had found something stupid.

I swung open my front door with a real passion, simply because I could take my car out and not have to tell my parents exactly where I was going. I went around the side of my house and opened the garage, stopping to stare in amazement that this beautiful creature was mine. I hopped in, blasted the local rap station, and took off down the road three houses to pick up Corey. His mom, as usual, was hot on his tail, interrogating him with her outrageous high-pitched squeal. He had learned well from the beast, though, because his bark was louder, and she subsided. Corey was just as excited as I was to be getting out of our neighborhood. Besides, whenever we would go out, I would always be real paranoid because my parents hated him for being such a bad influence. This meant they wanted him nowhere near the car that they had bought me. I always knew Corey was wild and would throw caution to the wind at any moment. He was my friend though, and he helped keep our neighborhood alive with one adventure or another. Besides, whenever my parents would complain about him, I would tell them what I knew to be true: individuals make their own decisions, not their friends.

We were headed to a friend of Corey's who sold weed. I pulled onto some dirt road and saw his friend outside shooting hoops. As soon as he saw the car pull down the driveway, he fired a turnaround jumper and started walking toward the car. Once he got to the passenger-side window, he showed Corey the bag and negotiations began. Corey, weighing the bag with his eyes, said, "Yo, John, how you gonna

play me like that. I have known you since when? And you can't hook it up?" John played dumb for a while, acting like he was giving him a fat bag, but Corey could be real persuasive when it was in his best interests, and John gave up.

With the extra nuggets in the bag, we had enough to roll a real "Godfather" blunt, especially between only two people. I pulled into a shopping complex with a ShopRite and Home Depot in it, and we parked. The parking lot wasn't packed at all, and I couldn't tell at the time if that was a good thing or a bad thing. After Corey had rolled up the whole bag, except a nickel's worth, into the blunt, he licked it, sealed and toasted it with his lighter, and we took a second to admire this giant masterpiece of weed and cigar paper. Next, all four windows and sunroof were closed, and we were ready to bake. Corey held the lighter, coaxing the blunt to take fire and produce dragon-like puffs. It did, and by the time it went around twice in a puff-puff-give fashion, the inside of the car looked as clear as a sandstorm. A couple of hits later, with the blunt still raging, my rear view mirror started playing games with my head. I would keep seeing cars of all sorts driving by, and all of them looked like cops at first. Corey started to laugh at my run-in with paranoia. At first I was pissed, but then I started to laugh with him. The blunt was still burning slow like a champ, but I saw that we didn't have much time to get to the movies. I let down all the windows, and we jumped out of the car to see how much smoke we had actually filled it with. As delighted as we were, I hated going to the movies late, so we got in the car and took off. The rest is history.

I didn't realize how fucked-up I was until I got on the three-lane road and was actually driving. I had never been this high in my whole life, but I felt my driving was impeccable, so I kept smoking. I was having a blast cruising around in the warm weather. We were making jokes to each other about people in other cars, and checking out girls. I felt like I was on top of the world, but I was oblivious to the trouble to come. I stopped at a light turning yellow, just to be safe since we were smoking. The decision seemed like a good call, but it ended up being that one split-second factor that changed everything. At the light I handed the blunt to Corey, and he hit on it very obviously, like we were driving around in Jamaica, but I didn't care. Then I locked eyes with some guy directly to the right of me in his early thir-

ties who was with a younger-looking woman in his car. He looked away but then did a double take. Just as the light turned green and I sped off, I heard him say something. I was glad that the light had turned green and I didn't have to hear whatever this guy had to offer. All of a sudden, I looked in the rear view mirror and the guy was right on my bumper honking with a frantic rhythm. Then he started waving a badge out of the window, and I knew this was trouble. I started to panic and had to take deep breaths not to flip out. Corey tried to convince me to outrun him, but I refused to. This was partly because I was praying he would let us go, but more importantly, my whole body was frozen in fear. Corey threw the blunt out of the window, and I pulled into a Mobil gas station. The guy and the girl took their sweet time getting out of the car and over to my window.

His first words to me were, "How fucking high are you? Smoking weed, driving on Route 9 on a Sunday afternoon?" As the weed smell wafted from my car, the best response I could come up with was, "I'm not high. I was just smoking a cigarette." They immediately called for uniformed cops. Two cruisers pulled into the gas station. The cop asked us where the weed was, and we told him there wasn't any, hoping they wouldn't find the rest of the bag under the passenger seat. Then he brought two police dogs over and told us that if we didn't tell him, we would get in even more trouble. I finally caved, realizing the dogs would sniff it out. Once they retrieved the bag and a homemade honey bear bowl I had in my car, they threw us up against the back of the car. Corey started talking back to him with the swagger of the cop's son that he was. With this supposed force field protecting him, Corey went all out and acted as if he were Scarface himself. This didn't stop any of the cops who ended up smacking his hat off him and breaking his pager on the concrete. His dad never got mad when he heard about the treatment. I guess when someone acts up the way Corey did, it's pretty much procedure to give him a hard time right back.

Once the handcuffs were placed on me, and my rights were read, claustrophobia kicked in big-time. I hated having my hands restricted, and I had an itch on my face that was killing me. I looked up and couldn't believe all the cars passing by, seeing me getting arrested. All of the sudden, my brain seemed to see everything like a slide

show; each picture was the facial expression of someone I knew who could have been driving by at that very second and seeing this fiasco. Then one of the cops grabbed my arm and led me into the back seat of the cruiser, which was not an easy task. The worst part was that the handcuffs started to cut into my wrists from sitting on them. This new, more uncomfortable position of captivity sent a whole second wave of claustrophobia over my mind and body. However, I managed to take deep breaths and be remotely happy that I was being shielded from the public's eye. Then I was lulled into a deep trance, watching the scenery crawl by as I was being carted off. This was when I turned around to see Corey next to me with his usual crazy look. We both started to completely crack up, to the cop's disbelief. The weird thing about it is that I don't remember it even being a nervous laugh. We were just really high, and the whole thing seemed like a joke or a dream. I still didn't fully comprehend what was happening. Instead of dealing with the situation, I chose to stay in my cave. I guess it was easier to remain comfortably numb than to realize the mess I had gotten myself into.

When we were brought into the station, all the police seemed to have already heard about our stupidity, and each one had some smart-ass remark. We were immediately taken to different rooms and fingerprinted. I was chained to a wall in some small room. It seemed like I was alone in there forever. All my mind could think about was, "What if there is a fire and they forget about me?" Then my high started to come down rapidly, and reality kicked in. I just kept thinking that I hoped to God they would let me out, and I wouldn't have to call my parents. The detective eventually came in and asked me where we got the weed. I told him that we had gotten it from some guy on Main Street. I guess he didn't believe me because, next, he tried to set me up. He told me that Corey had said I forced him into the car and had made him smoke weed. I wasn't taking the bait, and I stuck to my story about Main Street, where a lot of people do sell weed off the block. Then he and another officer proceeded to exaggerate the trouble I was in, telling me that my parents could lose the car because it was a drug-seize. They also told me they hadn't decided whether or not to charge me with a DUI, and that if they did, I wouldn't be able to drive again until I was twenty. When they began to tell me about a possible

one-year jail term, I was starting to lose it, but managed to fight back the tears. Even though I knew some stuff about the law, at age sixteen, I was still scared and confused. I felt like the biggest idiot in the world. I couldn't get over how disappointed and outraged my parents were going to be. I thought about them losing the car and how that would be an even bigger slap in the face for having trusted me. Thinking about all this made me want to hide out in jail forever and not show my face to anyone; I was truly ashamed.

The moment came after about two hours chained to the wall. They had to make the call that I couldn't bear to witness. It was the worst feeling in the world reading my parents' reactions off the detective's face while he was relaying the news over the phone. For someone who did this all the time, his face looked surprisingly uncomfortable during the conversation, and he even cringed at one point. This just made me even more sick to my stomach, thinking about what my parents were saying as the cop was trying to get off the phone. My parents were good people and were probably completely shocked at the fact that their corn-fed son had managed to get arrested. The detective finally hung up the phone and shook his head at me in sorrow for my poor parents. Then he left the room and came back after a while to inform me that Corey's dad, the cop, had picked Corey up and he was free. I was angry that I was still there, alone, but then again, I wasn't really looking forward to my parents' arrival.

Through the wall, I could hear that my parents had arrived at the station, but I couldn't see them. The detective was explaining the facts, and he asked whether my parents wanted to bail me out or let me sweat out a couple of nights in jail. There was dead silence for a little while. Then I heard my mom say, "Leave him in for the night. Maybe it'll teach him a lesson." My heart sank. I couldn't believe that my own mother, flesh and blood, was willing to let her only child stay in this hellhole. Fortunately, my step-dad interjected and said, "Jean, we can't leave him in here; they'll eat him alive, even for one night." So they paid the bail. Finally, I was free from the wall, but now, I had to see them face-to-face. When I was escorted back into the station, they kept their cool, bulging veins and all. But when we got into the parking lot, it was a different story. It was the longest yelling spree I have ever endured, and the storm wasn't showing any signs of letting up.

At home, after several hours, they calmed down a little and discussed the fact that my arrest was serious, indeed, for a young kid. The night went on and they kept flipping out, telling me how everything was going to be "a whole hell of a lot different" in my life. I knew they weren't kidding. Then they must have felt sorry for me, seeing the reality of these consequences soaking in because they let my girlfriend come over for the night. Before doing this, however, they guaranteed me that it would be a long time before I would see her again.

The next morning, I woke up positive that the whole thing had been a nightmare. I came downstairs like a little kid at Christmas, anxious to find out whether I had been good this year or was getting coal. But there was no mistaking it; I had screwed up big time.

I wasn't allowed to go out for the next three weeks and was forced into hard labor around the house. When school started, my parents still had me on lock down and didn't ease up for a long time. They ended up selling my car. Court went well, on the other hand. I only lost my license for six months, but I ended up not driving either of my parents' cars for a year. The court also assigned mandatory drug counseling and fifty hours of community service. I felt the punishment that had been dished out by the court wasn't too severe. They struck a good balance between scaring me and not ruining my life.

This whole event changed the person I am today in many ways. Before being arrested, I thought that freedom was having the house to myself, instead of something people died for. When I was in those handcuffs and in custody, I felt like the cops could do whatever they pleased with me and that I had no rights whatsoever. I had always taken being a free citizen for granted. For the first time, I saw, up close, boundaries in the land of the free and home of the brave. I wasn't invincible any more. I realized that even a spoiled white boy is not exempt from consequences.

However this has changed me as a person, it changed my family's parenting of me ten times more. They became extremely strict, and I had to fight my way just for air. I was no longer the shining light, only son of my mother. I couldn't be trusted. I realized that trust was fragile and, once broken, could not ever be fully repaired. Their new view of me was what really killed me; I felt it right in my heart. I wasn't someone they knew anymore. Part of me was a stranger to them,



John Mahoney

and their disillusionment from that time still stays with me.

I can't really say that, ever since this incident, I have been transformed into a choirboy. I also never thought that I was such a bad person for smoking dope. I don't think that smoking is that big of a deal. Compared to a lot of the problems out there, it almost seems trivial. However, the way this incident made me view myself has proven to be a crucial factor in my life. It showed me directly that I was responsible for my actions and that being a carefree teenager did not make me bulletproof from the rest of society. In a way, I'm glad I learned this when I did, and that the ramifications were not too severe. Ever since that summer day, not by choice, but by habit, I think twice about the situations I put myself in, and that has made all the difference. So in looking back, maybe fate didn't screw me over as much as I thought at that yellow light that begged me to fly through.

A Downward Spiral

By Alan Flamenhaft

The judges have awarded "A Downward Spiral" a special commendation for excellence in writing.

She sat at the table contemplating her purpose in life and wondering where it had gone. Clenched in her hands so tightly that the skin looked as white as paper was a copy of *Jane Eyre*. The book had not left her side for the past ten years and had become like an extension of her body. As she was placing the book on the table, one would think that she was hesitating, but this was just a result of her molasses-like pace. Her eyes, the shade of a bluish haze, were glued to the cover as if she had never seen her old friend and confidant before. Her hands scanned the material of the cover as if she were reading Braille. Instead of flipping right to the first chapter, she studied the copyright page as if it had somehow changed over the last 75 years of her life and nobody had bothered to inform her. Sometimes she comprehended what she read, and sometimes her mind wandered to places she couldn't recall. Either way, she held onto this ritual the same way she held onto each inhale of air. At various times, members of the household had tried to put something else in her hands, whether it was *Reader's Digest* or *Maxim*. To those who were around during her prime, Grandma's beloved book, with its orphaned character who remains honest to her values and bravely faces the hardships of life, represented her continuous downward spiral.

So there she sat in the same corner spot by the dining room table reading as her daughter, Samantha, puttered around the house.

The front door slammed, and the paws of the household dog, Lex, could be heard scattering along the tile in his usual greeting. T.J. threw down his backpack and charged upstairs to see Grandma manning her usual post. He went right up next to her, put on his best smile, and said, "Hi Grandma."

There was no response, not even a twitch. So he repeated the greeting with increased decibel. Still there was no response, but he was used to it. He placed his hand on her back and slowly she looked up.

Instead of instant recognition, she was utterly confused for a second, then came to with a warm smile of acknowledgement.

He was only eighteen, but he could see the distinctive path that age and Alzheimer's had taken. "You're still reading that old book, Grandma?"

She was staring at him with a confused look, and T.J. was ready for the same old game of trying to get her to respond when he caught her off guard. "Why wouldn't I be reading it?"

Excited by the signs of life, he aimed to keep the little torch burning. Trying to conceal a smile, he answered, "Why wouldn't you? Maybe because you've read it too many times and should try something different."

She tilted her head slightly, looking almost offended. Surely, but agonizingly slowly, she shot back, "Jane Eyre is one of a kind."

T.J. laughed, shaking his head. "So are you, Grandma."

She managed a little smile that disappeared suddenly into thin air as her eyes became glued to a random spot on the wall. Realizing that this moment of rare, decent communication was over, he started to leave the room. Before he reached the door, T.J. stopped and turned around for one more look at the lady who truly baffled him. One moment she was dropping onetime comebacks at him and the next she was reduced to a zombie-like state. He found studying her in this mindless form depressing, so he left the room while making promises to himself never to get that old. She returned her focus to the book but did not turn the page for a long time, as her mind had left without knowing where it was going.

She was sixteen and had bright blue eyes that cried to squeeze every last drop out of this planet called Earth. She was going to be anything and everything imaginable. Youth flowed through her body like a river...She was dressed all in white, looking in the mirror at her elegant figure, ready to be wed. She felt the way the ring glided down her finger to a halt at the perfect spot...She loved the way he cradled their daughter for the first time. She had never seen him so gentle with a creature before, even herself...She was the backbone, holding together a family of three children while teaching dance at the university; she was needed.

"Ma, are you alright?" Samantha looked with concern at her mother who had managed to wind up in the garage facing a wall filled with cobwebs. "What did I tell you about wandering around? Next time you go on one of these adventures and fall, it's going to be worse than a bruised hip. For God's sake, you have to learn not to go places by yourself. I can't even check on the laundry without worrying about you!" Surprised at the harshness of her tone by the frightened reaction on her mother's face, she calmed down. "Come on, Ma. Let's go in the kitchen; you can help me peel the carrots for dinner. You know how you like to do that." As she took her arm and led her inside, Samantha's eyes started to water, but she quickly composed herself.

The night's dinner was the usual scene, catching up on the events of the day. Frank, the father of the household, worked as a defense attorney at the county courthouse and fought his conscience constantly over some of the scumbags he got off. Consequently, he was very busy and stressed, but he tried to remain an active father and husband. He currently had their twelve-year-old daughter, Kelly, on the stand over her less-than-satisfactory report card, but Kelly was used to being on trial at the dinner table, and she held her own. She was currently facing a two-week prohibition of telephone calls, and Dad was about to call in the Jury.

"Mom, what do you think? Sounds fair?"

Samantha looked up from picking at her food, trying to seem attentive, then gave up. "I'm sorry. What sounds fair?"

Kelly, sensing possible diversion, called for a recess. "Never mind, Mom, we can talk about it later."

Samantha nodded her head. "Ok."

Frank interjected, "We, as in your mother and I, will talk it over later."

Samantha glanced over at her mother and noticed her makeover. In one swift motion, she leaned over and wiped off the mashed potato mustache Grandma had created.

Her mother looked back at Sam and smiled, not in recognition, but with better things in mind.

"Samantha, will you please make me a cup of tea?"

"Sure Ma. What flavor will it be tonight?"

Grandma paused for a good second as if the fate of the world

revolved around this decision.

"Peppermint will be just fine for tonight, thank you."

"Peppermint it is. If you go down to the den with the kids to watch T.V., I'll bring it to you."

Kelly and T.J. escorted their grandmother to the den. It was not so much that she paid attention to reruns of the "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," but she seemed to be content being near her grandkids in any setting.

T.J. was her favorite, perhaps because he was mature enough to deal with the current situation.

Kelly, on the other hand, while being loving, was intimidated by her grandmother's random comments. Grandma would ask her where people she had never heard of had gone. One time when Kelly was alone with her, she adamantly insisted that she needed to take the car because she was late getting to dance class. Being in adolescence and insecure, Kelly dreaded bringing friends over to the house for fear that they would be scared off by her "crazy" grandmother. It was sad, the way she viewed her as a burden, but that's all she knew. She was too young to remember the woman her grandmother used to be, how she had kept the entire family together, and had been involved in every important decision. All she saw was the shell of someone she had heard a lot about, but never wanted to be like.

"You found her in the garage?" Frank barked with disbelief as his wife washed the dishes with reckless abandon.

"Yeah, and she had no clue in the world how she had gotten there," Samantha replied. "It was one thing when I at least knew I could turn my back on her for a second, but now I feel trapped." Tears began to stream down her face, and she appeared shaken by the realization of her newfound feelings.

Frank embraced her and spoke very softly in her ear. "Sam, I know how you feel about putting her in a home, but look what this is doing to you."

Samantha squirmed free from his arms and gave him a look dead in the eyes, warning of potential wrath if provoked. "Frank, I told you that I absolutely couldn't do that to her! She always said that

she would rather kill herself than sit around and wait for death with a bunch of strangers. You don't understand the look in her eyes when she said it; she wasn't kidding."

As Frank's mind raced for a plea bargain to resolve this, he realized he was in for some tough negotiations. He understood where she was coming from. He would have done anything possible to keep his own mother out of those hellholes called nursing homes, but cancer had taken care of that decision by itself. Personally, he thought, at this point in his mother-in-law's life, it wouldn't make much difference either way since she stayed in her own world ninety percent of the time. Finally, he realized there was only one way around it. "Listen, I think we're just going to have to consider live-in help."

Samantha, while intrigued by the thought of it, felt obligated to play the devil's advocate. "But we can't afford that. Do you know how much live-in help costs?"

Frank, far from defeated, soothed her worries by looking her square in the eyes and saying, "We will work something out; I promise."

Samantha managed a little smile, gave her husband a kiss, and returned to the dishes.

Thick smoke brewed in the dark kitchen, getting milkier by the second. One could see its massive clouds highlighted by the moonlight creeping through the window. The house was dead quiet except for the purr of slowly budding flames coming off the stove. There sat a teakettle, crimson black with flames encasing its outline. The smoke began to infiltrate the rest of the house, leaving no spot on the ceiling untouched. Meanwhile, activity by the stove was increasing rapidly, reaching the point where some people would run for the fire extinguisher and others out the door. The flames from the stove engulfed the wood cabinets on both sides and spread to the living room. In the living room, flames slowly but steadily worked up the legs of the coffee table. On the table lay *Jane Eyre*, unable to escape. Directly above the book on the ceiling rested the smoke detector with a battery so old, it might have come with the house.

Lex barked a lot in the middle of the night, and everyone, except the neighbors, seemed accustomed to his paranoid yap. However, when T.J. heard barking accompanied by frantic scratching on his door, he actually woke up. As he slowly sat up from a dreamy daze, the deep scent of smoke perked him up faster than anything on Starbucks's roster.

He jumped out of bed and raced toward the door handle. As soon as he opened the door, before he knew the state of the kitchen and family room, he knew something was deadly wrong. The extremely low crackling of the fire could be heard down the hall, calling for him to investigate. As he rounded the corner, he could feel the increase in temperature on his already clammy skin.

The first actual visual of his kitchen and living room ablaze sent T.J.'s jaw to the floor and froze his feet. He would later recall that he had stood there for a minute too long staring at the way the fire moved as if it were a living entity. After this raw power removed its claws from him, he screamed. The act itself caused him to wake up from this nightmare-like situation and react. Sprinting down the hallway, he stopped at his sister's room and threw open the door.

Kelly was sitting up in bed looking scared, probably due to his scream. He grabbed her hand pulling her out of bed in time to see their father in boxers and mother in a robe peering around the corner at the sight to behold.

Then moving, as one unit, Frank led his family away from the fire and out the side door to safety. Before heading back in for Grandma, Frank looked at his family and took a deep breath of fresh air.

The sight of her empty bed had sent shivers down Frank's spine. It was one thing to run back in, get her, and be out in time to smoke a cigarette as his house burned down, but an entirely different one now she was missing. Instinct drew him to first check the bathroom, one of her favorite wandering spots. He sent the door practically off its hinges to find no sign of her. His body temperature rose harmoniously with that of the house. Sweat dripped off his face as he rushed to the basement passing a view of his ravished kitchen.

The basement was a lot cooler and easier to breath in, but he felt trapped down there. Grandma remained missing, and his mind raced with possibilities. As he hiked up the stairs, he wondered if she

had left the house during the middle of the night and was outside. He thought of his family out there together, and the need to go outside swept through his body. He tried to calm down, but the smoke from the first floor was reaching its max. As he scanned every room on the floor, hope was fading.

After Frank had made the complete sweep, getting out of the house was predominantly on his mind. As he was approaching the front door, his feet tripped upon something, and he practically fell on his face. Looking down, he saw her cane lying by the front door. His eyes followed the path of the long wooden cane until it disappeared into a shadow in the corner of the front hall. He leaned over, reaching out into the dark corner, praying he would pat down something that resembled a human being. The first few inches produced nothing, but then he got a feel of something wool. His fingers frantically traced the path to its origin. Jackpot! The feel of leather-like skin almost toned down the intense feeling of nausea in the pit of his stomach. Throwing her on his back under normal conditions would probably have kept him off the racquetball courts for months, but adrenaline had taken over and his knees didn't even buckle with the added weight.

With Grandma on his shoulders, he stormed out of the house like Kurt Russell in the movie, *Backdraft*, but as soon as he saw his family huddled up together outside in the cold, he felt nothing but homeless. Frank was far from a medic, but on the way to laying her on the lawn, he could have sworn his cargo was dead. Then he heard a soft grunt of a mumble and reported her status to his hovering family.

Samantha took over from there, grabbing her mother's hand and squeezing it tightly. "Mom, you're going to be okay! Don't worry; the ambulance will be here soon. Everything is going to be fine." Samantha peered into her eyes and was almost convinced she was looking at the eyes of a deer caught in a pair of headlights. Her hands rested together, shaking violently, and snot was oozing from her nose.

"Let's go inside," said Grandma. "It's so dark and cold out here. Look at the kids; they're freezing out here in their pajamas. Let's go inside and get warm before these kids get pneumonia."

Suddenly, the sharp piercing cry of fire trucks and an ambulance filled the street, drowning out her voice.

It was some bonfire that night, and it seemed as if the whole

community was stopping by to sympathize. It was similar to the act of rubbing someone's back while they are vomiting. It doesn't help, but it's the right thing to do. These gestures by the neighbors couldn't come close to erasing the fact that pretty much half of every earthly possession they owned had been transformed into rubble. They were a sad sight standing there, watching the firemen sift through the smoldering debris of their once humble abode.

One of the firemen stopped by to give an update on the situation. "We're trying to recover whatever we can. The fire has been isolated, and within the next 48 hours, we should have nailed down the cause, but no promises."

Frank started to lose his cool, and with tears running down his red-hot face, he snapped at the fireman. "Listen, buddy, everything I worked for was in that house. And you can't even tell me why I've been standing out here watching my fucking life burn down? You guys are a god-damned joke! Maybe if you had gotten here a little sooner, we would at least still have a living room."

Frank caught himself before he could start another outburst, and his family caught him with a bunch of shocked looks. He took a step back from the fireman and started to wipe his eyes and regain composure.

The fireman, on the other hand, was as cool as a cucumber, pausing for a second and practically whispering in a monotone voice. "Listen, there's no way in hell that I can tell you what's going through your heads right now. I couldn't describe what it feels like to lose something priceless in your heart that's meaningless to an insurance company. There's no way to put a dollar figure on your losses today, and there never will be. However, everybody is alive, and your grandmother is on her way to the hospital. So if you don't mind, I have to get back to my job."

The fireman turned and walked away. His comments had hit Frank like a brick in the face, and he stood silent for a while. Finally he gathered himself and decided it was time to leave this horrid scene.

Samantha went to stay at the hospital with her mother, and the rest of the family went to stay with the Hendersons two blocks down the road. Almost everyone in the family had a sleepless night filled with tossing, turning and tweaked-out dreams involving fire. But

Grandma slept like a champ with the help of the drugs they had given her, dreaming of a night at the opera with steaming hot tea.

When Kelly woke up, before she opened her eyes to see the different surroundings, she was positive the whole thing had been a nightmare. Even after she took a peek at a room that was definitely not hers, she still wasn't a believer. It took running out the front door and hightailing it to her depleted home to make it sink in. As she sat on the curb in the cold, hypnotized by the horrid sight, she realized that she wasn't waking up.

The walk back to the neighbor's house was a slow one, and her head might not have lifted once. She wondered about the well-being of all the little things she had in her room, like the pictures that couldn't be replaced. By the time she got back to her current living situation, everyone was at the breakfast table trying to force down pancakes. She took a seat without looking at anyone and shoved a huge forkfull into her mouth.

The fire department called, and as Frank listened, the already quiet room was put on mute.

"Yes this is he...Yes...Yeah. Are you sure about this? Positive?...Shit! Will this affect the insurance? No, it never did go off.... Thank you."

He placed the phone down gently, and slowly turned around to face the pairs of curious eyes peering at him. While scratching the fresh stubble on his chin, he placed his hands on the table like a podium.

"Here is the story. The kitchen and living room are completely burnt. All the bedrooms upstairs have smoke damage but aren't ruined. They established that the fire came from the stove being left on with some object over the burner."

Samantha's jaw dropped in unison with the last statement. Her mind retraced the events of the previous night, especially dinner. Suddenly something clicked in her head and she gasped. "Oh my God!" she cried, as she covered her head in hands.

Frank demanded an explanation. "What is it Sam?"

"Oh my God! It was Ma. Remember I promised her tea after dinner? I totally forgot. She must have started to make tea in the middle of the night and then forgot about it. God dammit! We've lost our home, and it's all my fault." Breaking down in tears, Samantha looked

around the room as everyone took in the news. How could a sweet old lady who couldn't tie her own laces manage to burn down a quarter of their house? T.J. went over to his mother and put his arms around her.

"Mom, you know this isn't your fault, right? You didn't turn the stove on. Grandma hadn't even mentioned anything about the tea since dinner; she forgot, just like you did."

Samantha didn't seem to be comforted by her son's counseling and attempted to leave the room. Frank jumped up to catch her, but she pulled away.

"Please, I just need to be alone right now."

When she cracked an eye slightly open in the hospital room, she had no clue where she was, or why her beloved book wasn't by her side. A lady in all white had just placed a tray of breakfast next to the bed and tugged at her sheets to neaten them up. Already she trusted this woman as far as she could throw her, which didn't say much. In fact, she wouldn't have been surprised if somewhere, stashed away in her outfit, was her book.

"Give me my book back, thief," Grandma snapped at the nurse.

"Well, good morning, Mrs. Weiss. How are you feeling today?"

"I'd be feeling a whole lot better if I knew what I was doing in this rat hole."

The nurse was not taken aback at all by her crude manner. She had been used to dealing with this kind of temperament throughout her career, and it would take a whole lot more abuse to make her crack. So, calmly, she responded with a little humor, hoping to alleviate the patient's anxiety.

"Mrs. Weiss, every day I come to work with that exact sentiment. Luckily, you'll be out of here before lunchtime. I don't get out until six."

The old lady missed the irony of the nurse's response and proceeded to look left and right repeatedly to try to get a grasp on the situation. Her hands gripped the top of the hospital blanket until her knuckles turned pale, and the dark purple veins bulged out.

The nurse, only mildly disappointed that her witty comment hadn't created the intended response, tried another approach. She

walked over to the room phone on the wall and dialed the front desk's extension, all the while keeping an eye on her delirious patient. "Hi, Kathy, could you please call Mrs. Weiss's daughter? She has awakened and seems to be a tad disorientated. Thank you." Then returning her focus to the patient, she passed the time by fantasizing about an alternate life in another field.

"Sam, come on out," her husband pleaded. "The hospital called. Your mother is fine and we need to go pick her up."

"Pick her up and take her where, Frank?" Samantha questioned through the locked bathroom door in an exasperated tone.

Frank went to raise his fist to pound on the door but refrained. Instead he began lightly banging his head on the door in frustration. But once he caught himself in such childish behavior, he jolted upright in a position to take control. "Just open the door! It's one thing trying to have a conversation like this after a fight at home, but come on, we're in somebody else's house; this is embarrassing."

"You think I don't know we're in somebody else's house!" Samantha screamed in a demon-like voice he had only been accustomed to in the bedroom.

Frank waited uncomfortably by the door in anticipation of a second outburst, but only heard sobbing.

"Listen Sam, I know you're under a lot of stress right now, but we all are, and the most important thing is that we be here for each other to get through this." Frank had spoken these words softly.

There was dead silence, and then he heard the click of the lock. Appearing an inch from his face was his wife with puffy, bloodshot eyes.

"We have to talk," Samantha ordered. She grabbed his collar, dragged him into the bathroom, shut the door, and the meeting was on.

Outside in the living room, Mr. Henderson pulled out an assortment of movies and even board games to try and raise the morale of the troops. So far, no such props had caused Kelly or T.J.'s lifeless heads to lift up from the arms of the couch. Due to the fact that the Hendersons had never had any kids, their movie selection sucked. Basically, they would rather watch reruns of their house burning down all day than pop in his best movie, "Chariots Of Fire." They appreciat-

ed his hospitality and sympathy, but dealing with it at this point was straight up difficult.

"Mr. Henderson, if it's alright with you, I think we're cool just checking out what's on T.V. Thanks anyway though," T.J. said, trying to sound polite.

"Sure, guys, whatever you're down with. I'm going to read *The Times* in the kitchen. Just shout me a holla if you need anything," Mr. Henderson said in his "slang voice."

"Thanks," they both chimed in.

After he left the room, Kelly looked at T.J. and laughed quietly. "Down with? Shout me a holla? It's so funny when grownups think the only way they can communicate to kids is with phrases they hear flipping past MTV. It's like, I learned Ebonics before English. Hello?" Kelly said this sarcastically, like a true teenage girl.

T.J. chuckled at her remark at first, then fully cracked up. It got so bad that he had to put his head under the pillow so as to not draw suspicion from Mr. "Down-With-the-Youth," in the kitchen. Even buried in the pillow, he could still hear Kelly laughing to the point where she was snorting, and this forced him to hide his face even more to conceal his next uproar of laughter. After a couple of minutes and hurt ribs on both sides of the couch, they couldn't physically laugh anymore. Then, without warning or reason, their mood was jerked violently back into their previous gloomy state. After a couple of seconds, they gained the courage to look at each other in order to acknowledge this shift in the pendulum.

"We're going to be alright, T.J., right?" Kelly's voice cracked with uncertainty.

T.J. paused for a second for dramatic effect as if he were seriously weighing out the situation. He put on his most serious face, where one eyebrow would always tilt upward, and watched as Kelly waited breathlessly for his assessment.

"Kelly.... I think we'll be fine as long as Mom and Dad don't start talking to us like Mr. Henderson," he said with a giant smile.

"You're such a jerk," Kelly griped. She couldn't hold her "mad face" anymore, and broke out in laughter while throwing a pillow at T.J.'s head. He threw one back, and they were both grateful to have each other to deal with this disaster the only way they knew how, with

laughter.

Back in the bathroom, Samantha sat on the toilet seat cover with a pile of wadded toilet paper bunched up in her lap. Frank sat on the edge of the tub with his hands interlocked in front of him, looking determined to find a resolution.

"Alright, honey. First of all, we'll eventually be able to move back into our house. The immediate problem..."

"Is my mother," Samantha blurted out.

"Through no fault of her own, she's a danger to others and herself. We have to put her in a home, Sam," Frank replied.

Samantha stood up from the toilet seat and turned around to face the mirror over the sink. As she stared at her reflection in the mirror, Frank appeared in her sight though her back still remained to him.

"Sam?" Frank probed.

Her mind was brought back to earth with this, and she looked at his eyes through the mirror.

"I promised her," she whispered.

"But Sam..."

"No buts. It wasn't some kind of bullshit promise. You should have seen her, Frank. She was so deliberate about it. She said she would rather die than go into a nursing home," Samantha testified.

"So what're you saying, someone should put her out of her misery?" Frank asked sarcastically.

Samantha slowly turned her head to meet Frank eye-to-eye without the protection of the mirror. She didn't say a word for what felt like an eternity to him. He was just about to get on all fours and beg for forgiveness for his last words when she opened her mouth.

"Let's put it this way. I'd have a whole hell of a lot easier time swallowing some sort of 'accident' than wheeling her into a home," Samantha said coldly.

Frank smiled and shook his head at her, but when he received no smile back, his jaw dropped a good two inches.

"You're kidding right? Sam, please tell me you're kidding!" Frank said, his voice reaching an almost feverish pitch.

"It's no joke, Frank. I love her too much to put her some place she has described as her personal hell," Samantha responded coolly.

Frank took her hands in his and proceeded to squeeze them

gently. "Babe, I know you love her and would do anything for her, but come on. No matter what she says, that's not the answer. It's not like she's in dire pain and the act of living is too much. You actually think that she wouldn't ever want to see her grandkids again or her own children, simply because of the fact that she's somewhere where they can give her the help she needs?"

His words, combined with his touch, broke the cold glaze over her, and she fell into his arms crying quietly.

As he embraced her, he spoke quietly in her ear. "I know it's tough, Hon. A lot of people are forced to go through transitions like this later in life. Be happy that she's not in pain. If anyone needed to pull a Kevorkian, it was me with my mother. Remember how sad that was watching the cancer rip through her during the last couple of years?" Frank placed his hands on her arms, pulling her away to speak face to face. "Remember? Alzheimer's is no joke, and down the road she might be at that point where the pain outweighs the pleasure, but she's not there yet," Frank preached.

Suddenly Samantha turned very pale and looked as if a breeze could blow her over. He placed her on the toilet seat cover and kneeled down to her level. She placed her lowered head in her hands and continued to snuffle for a little before finally looking up.

"You're right," she whimpered, and then paused for a second. "She can't live with us because it's too dangerous for everyone involved, and when it comes down to it, I couldn't take her life, at least not in these circumstances," Samantha said.

Frank relaxed a little, lowered his shoulders, and propped himself up on the edge of the bathtub, relieved that his wife wasn't scaring him any more with talk of "accidents."

"What are we going to do with her right now? I don't feel comfortable bringing her here, and she has to leave the hospital today. When Lauren from choir practice decided to put her father in a home, it took four months," Samantha said in frustration.

"I found a very nice place fifteen minutes away in Fishkill that just happened to have an opening recently, but they can't save it for long," Frank responded.

"When, this morning?" Samantha asked incredulously.

"No," Frank replied as he looked down at the floor.

Samantha's face turned completely red and was frozen in shock.

"You went behind my back with something this important?"

How long have you been planning this out, Frank? How long? A month? Three months? How fucking dare you!" Samantha screamed. Samantha rose from the seat and looked down at Frank as if she was about to throw a punch. He stood up as well and got right in her face, backing his actions.

"I didn't mean to go behind your back. You were under a lot of stress and I just wanted to do some research without worrying you. It's not like I set anything in stone. Come on now, Sam," Frank pleaded. Samantha's eyes were still sharp with distrust, and she looked as if someone had stabbed her in the back.

"How long, Frank? Spit it out, Frank, how long?" Samantha demanded.

"I found out about the place a month ago from Lenny at work who's put his mother in and says it's not like the other places. I checked into it a while ago, but they had no vacancies. Then three days ago, I got a message at work that a spot had opened up. After you found her in the garage yesterday, I figured we should at least consider it as an option," Frank testified.

"I can't believe you would keep a secret like that concerning my own mother. I can't deal with all this right now. I'm going to lose it," Samantha said in a strained voice. She ran her fingers through her hair and held them tightly pressed against the back of her neck. Then she locked her hands together, resting them over her mouth.

Frank sat attentively, waiting for her next stream of thought.

"Does she at least get her own room?"

Frank nodded his head and smiled slightly as he put his hand on her knee.

By the time the family had exited the mall, each had at least one set of clothing to wear for at least that day. They piled into their van like soldiers on their way to a secret mission. In the back seat, in a Barnes and Noble bag, lay a brand new copy of *Jane Eyre*. There wasn't any talking or even radio for the first ten minutes to the hospital. Then T.J. broke the silence.

"This is for the best, right?" T.J. asked tentatively.

Samantha waited for Frank to field the question because she was afraid of having another crying attack and didn't want to be a complete mess at the hospital. But when she heard no response from Frank, she cleared her throat, faced the back seat, and said, "Guys, this is pretty much the only option we have right now. Who knows? Maybe she'll grow to like the place."

"I'm scared to be there when you tell her. She might flip out," Kelly said with anxiety.

Frank looked at the kids through the rear view mirror and said, "Don't worry, your mother and I will handle this. I'm warning you that she might feel betrayed at first, but believe us, guys; this is for the best." After a while of dead silence, Frank turned on the radio and took his wife's hand. She was, once again, on the brink of tears.

The hospital room smelled like rotten Chinese food and had next to no air circulation. Grandma lay asleep with her hands still clutching the blanket close for protection. The whole family tiptoed in, denying the fact that they had to wake her up anyway. Samantha was the first to nudge her, calling her name in her ear twice before her eyelids opened.

As soon as they did, everyone gave her a hug and kiss, one by one.

"Ma, we're so glad you're all right," Samantha said, and everyone chimed in.

"Hey, Grandma, I knew you were all right when the nurse told us you pretty much wanted to fight her," T.J. said, drawing light laughs.

"That women is evil! Don't believe a word she says," Grandma exclaimed.

"Ok, Grandma, we won't. I didn't like the looks of her anyway," Kelly said, mildly sarcastically.

There were awkward vibes in the room, and even the old woman could sense the storm to come. "Well, what're you waiting for? Take me home. You know I can't stand being institutionalized," she said as she started to remove the blanket.

Everyone in the room, except Samantha, looked down at the floor or around the room—as long as the poor disillusioned woman wasn't in their sight. Samantha glanced at her family and knew it was time to bite the bullet.

"Mom, there is a problem. The house caught on fire and burned down. We don't have anywhere to go," Samantha said without conviction.

"What on God's earth are you talking about? That house is as sturdy as steel," Grandma replied.

T.J. pretended to fiddle with a blood pressure monitor on the wall, and Kelly walked by the window and stared out. Frank felt that the tension in the room was higher than in any courtroom he had ever been in, and he started to blurt out the truth of the matter.

"Mom, you..." Frank said, as he was sharply cut off by Samantha who placed her hand on his elbow.

"Mom, we're pretty sure that, inadvertently, you left the stove on in the middle of the night."

"That's ridiculous. Why would I do that?" Grandma asked.

"I'm not saying you did it on purpose, but things need to change. Ma, we've found a place where they can tend to your needs better, and you will be safe. We're going to take you there and try it out," Samantha said with authority.

"My needs? That's a joke. I raised you better than to disown me like this," she said bitterly.

"That's not fair," Samantha cried as she left the room.

The rest of the family remained in shock and still had trouble looking at her. Frank waited like a coward for the "Grandkids" to bail him out, but with no response, he was up to bat. "Mom, this isn't a bad thing. You're only going to be fifteen minutes away. We will visit you a lot, and you can come over."

"Don't talk to me! You probably tricked her into it," Grandma hissed.

With that last outburst, she became bug eyed and kept looking around the room as if she were lost. T.J. finally managed to unglue his eyes from the blood pressure device and look at his grandmother.

"Grandma, it's not like that. We love you. We wouldn't do anything that wasn't in your best interest," he said.

Suddenly her eyes started to roll back into her head. Her head kept rotating, unable to focus eye contact on one thing in particular, and her fingers twitched repetitively.

T.J. felt his words had been wasted because she obviously was not with them anymore. She was back in her own world again, off somewhere. It was so weird how one minute she could battle it out, and the next, she could be looking you dead in the eye but not be able to see you, like a ghost. He walked up to her and kissed the currently mindless form of flesh on the forehead, not for her benefit, but for his own piece of mind. Then he took Kelly by the hand. She took one look at her grandmother and left on the verge of tears. Frank sat down in the chair, took a deep breath, and exhaled toward the ceiling, as if smoking a cigarette.

They were loaded up by the hospital staff and were ready to take her to the "home" in a matter of an hour, which felt like three. T.J. and Kelly spent the wait throwing pebbles in the parking lot while their parents sat talking in the car. The car ride there was pretty tame, considering the ordeal in the hospital room. Kelly sat up front with Frank in the passenger seat. In back, Samantha and T.J. sat on either side of the comatose woman. She was still deep in one of her dazes, but they would look over and try to talk to her to make sure she wasn't just being stubborn.

When they pulled up to the front gate, a middle-aged woman gave them the brightest and fakest smile they had ever seen. It was even worse than the waiter at the diner a couple of nights ago, who had tried way too hard for a tip. Instead of trying to wipe the smile off her face with one tactic or another, Frank countered with an even more ridiculous one. Inside the gate, old people could be seen being led around by nurses at a snail's pace. They parked in front of the main building, and Frank ran in to get assistance. Two minutes later, two big male nurses the size of oxen came out to escort Grandma out of the car. They appeared very personable and hadn't lost their faith in attempting to communicate with the half living.

Once she had been wheeled inside, they were given over to a personable lady who gave the tours. The dining room was very elegant

with paintings all around. The highlight of the tour was the infamous game room. Filled with excitement, the lady began to describe it. "We have several comfortable chairs for our guests to sit in and chat. We also have chessboards, as well as every board game imaginable. And you can also see our brand new 80-inch TV screen with surround sound, and a DVD player," she bragged with a smile.

The lady leaned over to Grandma, got right in her face and said, "Doesn't that look like fun, Mrs. Weiss? We play a DVD every night at 7:00 p.m. and a new release every Saturday. Just because you're at a retirement center doesn't mean that you can't keep up with the times," she stated. The lady laughed at her own line that she had probably dropped a million times before and didn't stop until someone complied with an awkward chuckle.

Grandma's eyes focused on the lady and managed a half-hearted nasty look.

With a damaged smile that had been affected by Grandma's glare, the lady looked back at the family.

"Well, if she is more of a book or active person, we..."

"Preaching to an atheist," Grandma interrupted but refused to look at the woman.

"Excuse me, did you say something, Mrs. Weiss?" the lady asked.

"You're preaching to an atheist! There's no way I'm living in this morgue," Grandma barked.

By now, the lady's tentative smile had broken into a jaw that dropped a good couple of inches. She was truly shocked by the woman who had previously represented anything but a challenge.

T.J. grinned at the lady's reaction to his grandmother's comments for a split second then regained composure.

Samantha put her hand on her mother's shoulders and squeezed gently, and Grandma attempted to shrug the hand off her shoulder, but failed.

The tour guide, sensing trouble to come, dropped the line that sealed the deal.

"Well, I guess you're ready to see your room, Mrs. Weiss," the tour lady said.

"Great. At least I won't have to watch you tap dance around

for the potential buyers," Grandma hissed while gesturing towards her family and giving the lady a fake smile.

"All right then, Mrs. Weiss, let's go," the lady said, trying hard to remain professional.

The route to the room could definitely have been planned out better. Samantha thought of turning the wheel chair around with each dismal image she saw. Everyone in there was stone faced with no animation whatsoever. Then she looked down at her mother who was currently mumbling curses directed at the tour lady and the place in general. Sam looked up at some lady with wild gray hair stumbling down the hall. The lady was making some sort of deep gargling sound with her throat. Hot on her tail was a male nurse, trying to get to her before she could make a scene in front of the newcomers. He managed to grab her shoulder and lead her down the hallway. Two seconds later, they made a right and turned into room 450. After they crossed the threshold, Samantha fought off a desire to leave with her mother immediately. However, her one bag was placed on the floor and the point of no return had been reached.

The room itself was far from a crappy hotel; in fact, it looked nice, even livable. There were four pieces of furniture in the room, not including the T.V.: a bed, a small reading table, a lamp, and a green couch. The room was compact, especially with five people in it. The "old people smell" was thick, probably due to a lack of air circulation.

"This is cozy, Ma," Samantha coaxed.

The old lady responded with a cold stare. She had been worn down by this drastic change of scenery and life. Then she stood up slowly, fighting off Frank's gestures of help. She walked slowly over to her new bed, sat down, and faced the window overlooking a yard with trees.

Samantha went about the room, unpacking some clothes and placing the new copy of *Jane Eyre* on the table. She wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible with her conscience still intact. Her mother wasn't making it any easier on her. How could she leave with her mother not even speaking to her? The whole situation also made her worry about her own fate when she reached this age. Looking at her mother sitting there on the bed, all gloomy, made her feel as if her fingerprints were all over the knife sticking out of her mother's back.

Frank was getting fidgety and liked this place as much as his own late mother's cancer ward. The time was coming for closure, and it couldn't come sooner. He looked at his kids sitting next to their depressed grandmother, and it was sad. Then he stood up from the couch he had been sitting on and approached the bench with his closing statements.

"Well, Mom. I've had one hell of a day, and I'm exhausted. So you're going to give it a shot here for a little. I'll be back tomorrow to stop in and visit. Bye," Frank said as he rubbed her shoulder and turned around to leave. On his way out, he looked at Samantha and whispered, "I'll be right outside if you need me. Stay strong."

Samantha stood with tears forming, biting her lip to stop from being a complete mess.

Kelly followed the path that her dad just plowed, by saying her goodbyes as well. She planned to keep it simple because who knew if she would get a response back at all, and she felt really uncomfortable. She walked in front of her grandmother, leaned down, looked at her eyes, and gave her a kiss. Her grandmother said with a tiny smile, "I love you," and squeezed her hand once before she dropped it. Kelly promised, "I will visit." She walked out of the room with misty eyes, but ironically, she had never felt as close to her grandmother than at that moment.

Samantha really started to have trouble with this touching goodbye. That could be she and her daughter not long from now. Then she started to cry even more, imagining what the poor woman must be thinking.

T.J. went up to his grandmother not long after Kelly for his goodbyes. They said, "I love you," and T.J. gave her a big hug and kiss. While they embraced, she said in his ear, "Don't ever let this happen to your mother; it's not fun." T.J. was startled, but managed to divert with, "I'll check up on you tomorrow."

A tear began to drop as she watched him walk out of the room. Then, when the door closed, she ignored Samantha's blubbering presence and focused back on the window.

Samantha's whole body started to heave with convulsions. She stood there crying, waiting in vain for her mother to cut her some kind of emotional break. It had been hard dealing with the fire in the

house, but this was a whole other level of pain. After a minute of sobbing uncontrollably with no interjection from her mother, she snapped. She stormed over to her mother in need of some response, so she could leave and then cry in the comfort of her neighbor's house.

"Mom! Look at me," she demanded, but got no response in return. "Mom, you act like this is easy for me to do. We had no other options. I'm sorry, Ma. This kills me to do this, you know."

"Well, I'm at least glad that you have the compassion to feel bad for yourself, Samantha."

Samantha's tears froze up for a second because she was shocked by the comment.

"That's not fair, Ma".

"Oh, and becoming an orphan at age 75 is? I feel sick knowing that my own daughter could leave me in a place like this—waiting to die, rotting away."

With this crucial blow hitting her daughter's conscience with the force of a Mack truck, she shut her out, magnifying the effects of her comment.

"Mom, don't do this. I love you, Mom," Samantha said as she tried to put her hand on her shoulder but was shrugged off.

Her mother got up and sat on the couch while grabbing the new copy of *Jane Eyre* off the table. She sat there and slowly opened it up, refusing to look up.

Samantha sat on the corner of the bed, alone. Her crying didn't let up, and she had to get out of there immediately. There was nothing left to say or do. She hoped that the old stubborn woman would come to her senses over time. Just because she was living with strangers didn't mean that her family wouldn't be around for her, no matter how depressing this place was. Samantha grabbed her pocket-book, kissed her mother on the forehead, and headed for the door. When she turned around one last time, her mother was looking at her, tears streaming down her face.

Samantha ran back, gave her a hug, and said, "I love you, Mom."

Her mother nodded her head and looked down at her book, pretending to read.

Samantha left the room leaving the door open a crack.



Stephanie Moskal

After there was no more noise in the room and the echoes of footsteps in the hallway had died, the old lady's head popped up from the book to look around the deserted room. She felt completely alone, and it sent chills through her body.

Suddenly, a nurse popped her head in and announced, "Mrs. Weiss, I will show you to the dining room for dinner in about an hour." The nurse slammed the door shut and left without waiting for a response.

With the book in her hand, the poor old woman walked to her bed and sat down. She looked out the window at birds flying about the limbs of a big oak tree. The sun was setting rapidly in the background, threatening darkness to creep through the already bleak room. Her outline could still be seen vaguely through the reflection of the window. She waited for a while and watched as darkness took over her reflection. She became dead inside. She held her book tightly and mumbled, "At least I had my pride," repeating it quietly into the pitch-black room.

Portrait

By Ilene Correia

Inspired by a piece at the 2002 Curry College Student Art Exhibition.

You, child,
Your hands held in paint,
Your dreams etched in lacquer
Keeping you still, if only for an eternity.
You who were frozen in time
To remain forever young,
Your fading blue eyes hold secrets
Of a life captured before it was lived,
And still your impish grin laughs silently,
Smiling, perhaps, at the life that passes you by.



To My Creator

By Felix Montanez

Inspired by a piece at the 2002 Curry College Student Art Exhibition.

Why did you draw me like this?

Look at me.

Where am I going?

My legs point in different directions.

Why did you use these colors?

I feel like I'm falling into an abyss.

Am I supposed to express
your feelings? What do you see
when you look at me? I don't
think others

see what you see. You see a piece of art. Others
search for answers to existential
questions when they look at me.

Am I making you think?

Are you going to answer?

I quit trying to figure you out.

Cristal

By Heidi Agranovitch

Cristal brushed her dirty blonde hair out of her face and looked up from the magazine that she was reading. "What the hell are you talking about?" she asked me.

"You heard me. I said you should write a book, a book about your life."

"You think anyone would want to read it, Heidi?" Cristal asked as she lay down on my bed and looked up at the ceiling.

I turned and looked at her. At 19 years of age, Cristal had already experienced so much. I sat back for a moment and thought. Would anyone want to read a book about her life? I smiled to myself; the answer was so obvious.

Cristal May Ruggiero is a name I will never forget. She is the strongest person I know, both physically and mentally. She is always willing to lend a helping hand and puts everyone else's safety before her own. Though I've only been friends with Cristal since the fifth grade, I feel as though I've known her my entire life; she is my best friend.

When we were ten years old and in the fifth grade, she would sit with me in the lunchroom as I finished the last of my pudding snack or BOKU juice. I was such a slow eater as a child that I would just be starting my lunch as everyone else was finishing. My friends would run off after they were done eating to go play and enjoy their recess, leaving me to an empty cafeteria. It reminded me of a stampede as all of the kids would run out into the playground. After all of the children ran outdoors, I would look to my side, and there would be Cristal sitting next to me. Day after day, she was always there.

"Hurry up, Heidi; you eat so damn slow," Cristal would always say as her head rested on the table from boredom.

These were the words I heard every day at lunchtime; however, Cristal never left my side.

What Cristal went home to every day was a dysfunctional and disturbed family. She spent the first nine years of her life in the projects, where she experienced drive-by shootings and drug deals. By the time she was ten, her parents had gotten together enough money to move into

a house where she lived with her four siblings and two nieces. I remember her parents being upset and grumpy most of the time. Both of her parents worked long hours each day, her father at a local sewage plant and her mother at a Bradlee's. Her father was always in dingy clothing, and I never once saw him smile. Her mother seemed to be more friendly, but she was very impatient. The one specific detail I remember about her mom is that she had a missing front tooth.

Cristal grew up with her three older sisters, Candi, Lisa, and Kristen, as well as her older brother, Lou. None of them graduated from high school. Candi had two children by the age of twenty; Lisa was soon to be a mother at sixteen. Lou was constantly in and out of jail; he was always on drugs and in a gang. Kristen was the worst of them all. She had gotten expelled from high school at fifteen and was constantly getting into fights with people over petty things. Kristen was always in jail for either possession of drugs or fighting. She had had too many abortions to count. Kristen didn't care about either herself or life, in general. Cristal grew up in the midst of all of this.

My mother would always say, "Cristal comes from a bad family. I don't like you going over there so much."

Cristal's childhood was filled with anger, poverty, police and drugs.

Several years passed before we spoke again. Throughout junior high school, we seemed to lose touch. We separated and had different groups of friends. I leaned toward the studious kids, while Cristal leaned toward the slackers and goof-offs. We had gone from being best friends to just a simple, "Hey," in the hall as we passed each other. I watched as Cristal lost friends, partly because most of her friends came from middle-class families, so their parents did not approve of the environment Cristal was living in, and also because she was starting to experiment with drugs and cigarettes at that time. Her old friends weren't into smoking or narcotics, so losing us was bound to happen.

"Cristal's brother [or sister] got arrested, again," my father would say at the breakfast table as he glanced over the police logs from the local newspaper.

Her family gave her a bad reputation and a bad name. Though Cristal did smoke marijuana, she never got arrested, and she was genuinely a good, honest person.

In our sophomore year of high school, everything changed. We were put into the same algebra class and sat next to each other. Soon we started to talk more and more. We would sit in class and pass notes about how weird and funny-looking our teacher, Mr. Popek, was. He was the type of teacher who, if you asked him a question right from the test itself, he would give you the answer because he had forgotten that it was on the test. One by one, each of us would ask a different question; soon, all of the problems would be answered. Of course, I learned nothing from his class, but it was always enjoyable to take tests in there. Cristal and I never forgot tenth-grade algebra.

Since I had last been good friends with Cristal, she had moved twice. She gave me the directions to her new house, and soon I was there every weekend. I was always a little leery of going over there, her parents always bickering, her siblings straight-faced and violent. I went anyway because, despite it all, Cristal was always smiling and remained positive.

By junior year, we were becoming best friends once again. We were always at each other's houses and on the phone. We reminisced about the old days as well, like when we had made up songs and performed them in front of our parents in our backyards, or when we would yell swears at the top of our lungs inside the window and run as soon as a teacher was coming to find out who the culprits were. Then, there were the memories of the two of us sitting in an empty cafeteria as I slowly ate my lunch, savoring each morsel.

One day, as I sat in Cristal's bedroom, her older sister, Kristen, walked in. Kristen had never liked me; I came from a "good" family, I had some money, and I had no idea what kind of struggles they were going through.

"You here again?" Kristen asked as she gave me a dirty look. "Look at you this time. You've got a skirt and a nice little silk blouse, how cute. You must think I'm straight out of a garbage can. I got on jeans and a t-shirt. Your mommy would never let you put on these kinds of clothes, huh?"

"Shut up, Kristen!" Cristal yelled.

"Why are you friends with little Miss Priss anyway?" Kristen asked, pointing at me. "She ain't nothing like us. Look at her, thinking she's all better than us and shit."

"I don't think I'm better than you at all," I said, as my voice cracked and my body shook.

"What? Did I ask you a question? I'm about to teach your little rich princess ass a lesson," Kristen hissed as she began walking over to me with her fists clenched.

I stopped breathing. I knew that with just one hit from her, I'd either be in the hospital or dead. Tears came to my eyes, and I just looked away, beginning to cry. I heard a loud noise and looked up to see Kristen fly up against the wall head-first.

Cristal stood over her. "Don't you ever even think about touching her again!" she screamed and motioned for me to leave the room with her.

Cristal and I would take walks in her neighborhood quite frequently. Before, I hadn't minded, because she had lived in a safer section of town. Now, the neighborhood she lived in was in ruins, it was violent, and was unsafe. However, I always felt safe when I was around her. She had play-fought with her father her entire childhood, as well as actually fighting with her brother and sisters who were all at least three years older. She was physically very strong; throughout high school, when she got into fights, she never once lost. Her family had made her a physically strong person, but she had made herself mentally strong.

As our junior year came to a close, I noticed that money was running tight in her family. She was wearing dingy clothing, and looked malnourished.

During the summer, before our senior year was about to begin, Cristal informed me that her family was moving to Florida. They could no longer afford to live in Connecticut, so they had decided to move where the taxes and rent were lower. One day, I sat in her living room and watched her family pack for the big move.

Cristal stood up from the couch and said, "Dad, you got to wait until I graduate. Let's move next summer; please, I just want to graduate."

"We're moving now. I ain't waiting any longer. None of us graduated. What makes you so sure you will? Even if you do, don't go thinking you're any better than the rest of us, because you ain't shit. You'd just be a little girl running around with a piece of paper; that's all

you'd be," her father snapped.

"What are you looking at Miss Priss?" her father asked as he looked at me. "You got money for us, so we can stay here or something?" her father asked with sarcasm.

Cristal got up, looked at me, and said, "Let's go; I'm gonna find me a place to live; I ain't moving to Florida."

Within two weeks of that discussion, the Ruggiero family had moved out of their house. Her brother, Lou, moved in with his girlfriend; however, everyone else moved to Florida. None of her sisters could afford to support themselves, so they had no choice but to move to the Sunshine State. Cristal moved in with another one of her best friends, Sarah. She planned on graduating with her class of 2000 and then moving down to Florida with a diploma in her hand, the first one her family would ever see. She worked, went to school and held Sarah while she cried all night long because her mom and stepfather were alcoholics; they beat on Sarah and called her names while they were drunk. Several times Sarah had tried to kill herself because of this. Cristal lived with this disturbed family for about three months, enduring the name-calling and negative comments. One night, Sarah's mother came home drunk from a bar and started yelling at Cristal because the dishes in the kitchen sink had not been washed. Cristal explained that, at two o'clock when she had gotten out of school, she had gone straight to work and had only come home a few minutes ago.

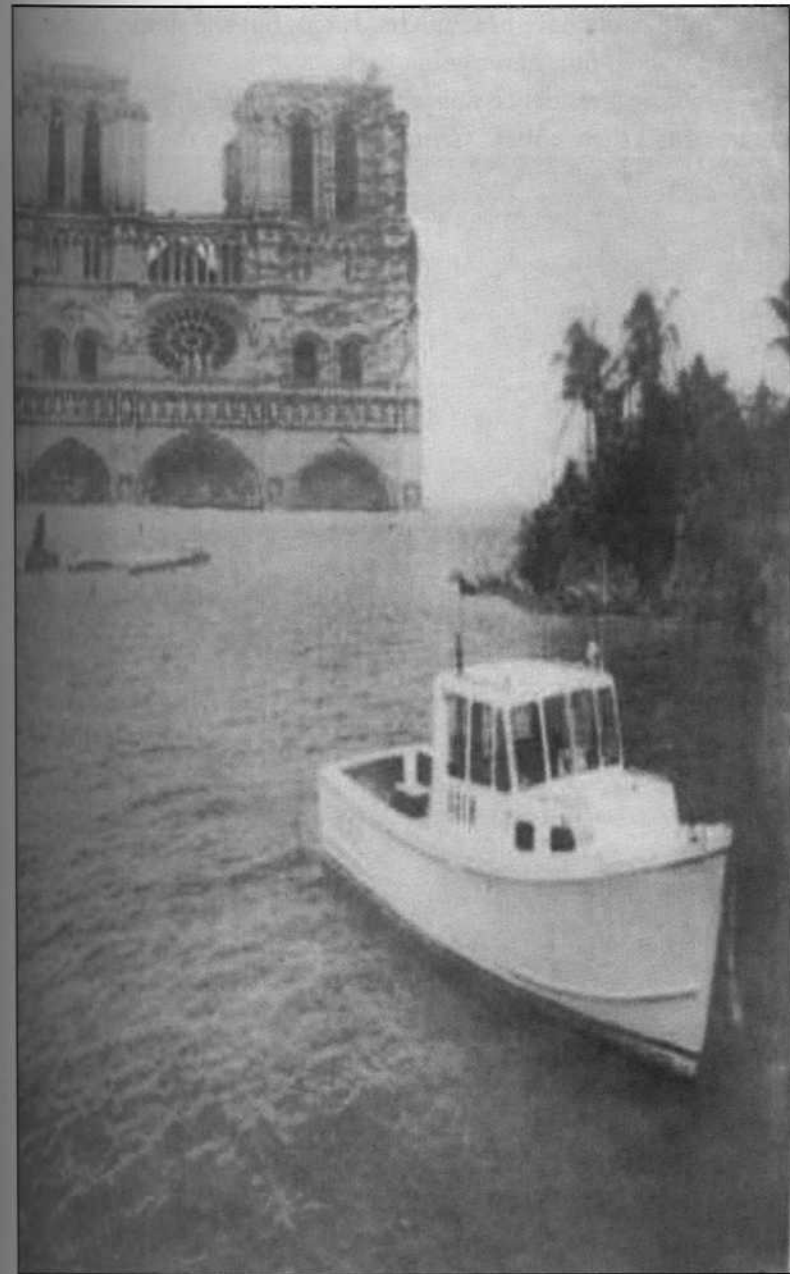
"You're lying to me, you fat bitch; go wash the dishes and get the fuck out of my face!" Sarah's mother screamed.

Sarah retorted, "Mom, Cristal cleans this house every day for us; she even cooks us dinner; she knows she has to wash the dishes, so she will; now leave her alone."

Her mother started running towards Sarah, but Cristal stepped in the way, replying calmly, "You'll have to get past me, first, Mrs. Fargo."

A glass was thrown at Cristal's head, which barely missed her. As Cristal started walking out the door, Sarah's mom jumped in the way.

"Hit me, little girl. I know you want to; big bad Cristal wants to hit me....I'm so scared, maybe I'll cry!" Sarah's mother screamed as she laughed hysterically.

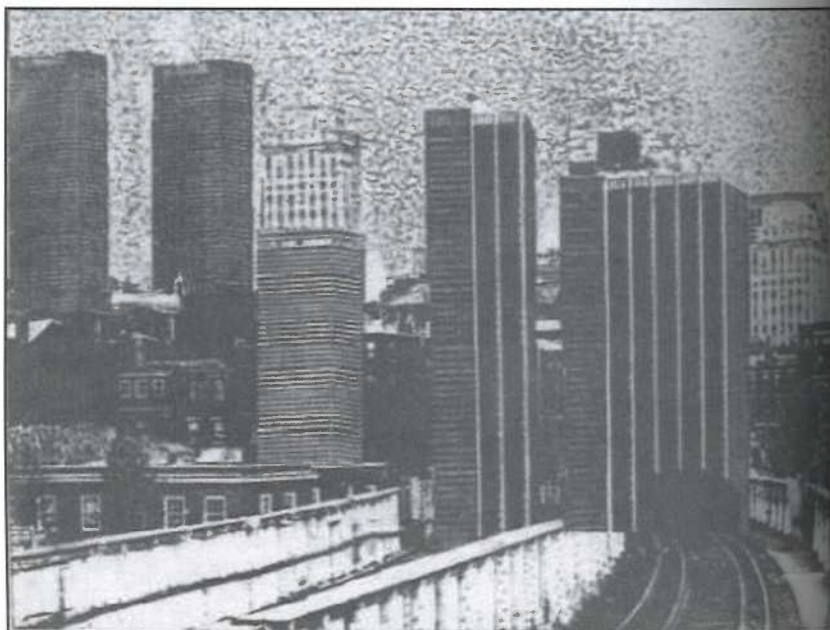


Ben Steinberg

Cristal could easily have beaten Mrs. Fargo, but she simply pushed her aside and walked out, never going back.

Her next residence was with her good friend, Jessy, but things were not good there either. Cristal had to sleep on the floor, deal with screaming each night from the domestic disputes between Jessy's mother and father, as well as hear gunshots from Jessy's brother as he shot animals for target practice in the backyard. She went days without eating, partly because there was hardly ever any food in that house, and partly because she was so depressed. Starving herself was making her lose weight, which she did need to do, but not in that way. Her grades were starting to slip. Her As and Bs had turned into Ds and Fs. She could never concentrate or have a quiet place to do her work. With everything she was dealing with at Jessy's, there was no way she could force herself up every morning to go to school, after what she had had to deal with every night.

I would take Cristal out to eat every once in a while to get food into her stomach; I knew she wasn't eating at Jessy's. She would order the soup, a salad, a main course, and then dessert. I would smile as she



Brian Winchester



Erin Driscoll

ate; I was happy I could help her in at least some way. Then, after she ate, she would run into the bathroom and throw everything up. Her stomach couldn't handle the food. It was not used to receiving the nourishment. It was around this time that Cristal started smoking pot everyday.

"It's makes me feel happy, and I need to feel happy once in awhile," she would say as I yelled at her for coming into my house high.

It was also around this time, in early November of our senior year, that Cristal started doing acid and ecstasy. Then came the drinking, then came the heroine, then came the addictions to them all. Soon, she had been kicked out of Jessy's house, and onto the street. She stayed on the street for several days, all alone at the age of seventeen, a homeless person.

Cristal would call me from a pay phone every day, "Just ask your mom again. I need somewhere to live. Heidi....Ask her again."

My mother's response was, "Tell her to go back to Florida with her family. She doesn't belong here. She's always getting into trouble. Don't hang out with her so much."

I would pick her up from whatever house she was staying at for the afternoon, and we would go someplace and talk. She would cry and scream and tell me her new problems, pouring her heart out to me every time. I would sit and listen, and comfort her the best I could. I was the only friend she had, and if I had decided to give up on her, I don't know what she would have done.

"It's going to be all right; everything will be ok," I would say to her trying to smile—this comment coming from someone who had a perfect life compared to what Cristal was going through.

She would always look up from the ground, tears pouring out of her eyes, and smile, "Thanks, girl, I love you."

Things couldn't get worse. She finally decided to go to Florida and live with her family, which she couldn't stand; plus, she hated hot weather. She was in heaven when it was snowing and her skin had goose bumps all over. The idea of living in Florida was not appealing, but it was something that she had to do. To avoid moving down to

Florida, she had even been so desperate as to want to move in with Amanda, a girl she didn't even like, who had seven younger brothers

and sisters. Cristal was willing to sleep in a room with two of her brothers, but at the last minute Amanda's mother decided that she wasn't interested anymore.

Florida was even worse. While she did have a roof over her head, dealing with her family was worse than living on the street. Cristal saved up for a bus ticket to come back to Connecticut. Within a few weeks she was living with her cousin, Julie. Julie lived in the same projects as Cristal had as a child. Julie was a horrible mother and treated Cristal very poorly as well. Cristal lived there for several months, going to school and trying to graduate, but when one of the fathers threw his baby across the room, Cristal was thrown out of the house because she had attacked him to protect the child. Cristal never graduated that year. She had no steady place to live, and this made it impossible for her to do her work and get the diploma she deserved. Moving back and forth to Florida had taken its toll, and before long she decided to reside in Florida with her family.

A year after I graduated from high school, Cristal received her GED, and she currently works in a drug store in Florida. This past summer, when she came to visit, she lay on my bed and asked me that question,

"Do you think anyone would want to read a book about my life? Should I really write a book about what I've been through?"

I just smiled at her. "I think so, Cristal; I really do, and if you don't, someday I will."

#3

By Matt Aldrovandi

She cuts through the dark waters,
The waves like black coffee licking at the bow.
The night is thick,
Air heavy,
Laden with moisture,
Hot.
We drop backwards from the port side
Falling into a bottomless pit.
Inky darkness surrounds me,
Etching fear deep into my soul.
Breath rips through the regulator,
Cold.
My light comes on,
Slicing through the midnight water,
Reflecting ghostly images up to me.
Surrealness invades my brain.
In a dream world
We go deeper,
Colder now, darker.
Fish flit in and out of the light beams,
Little flashes of color in the black.
Deeper still,
Silent,
Powdery sand appears.
Through a cave with the divemaster,
Huge crimson legs are visible with a sweep of the light.
A spider shifts under the reef,
Woken from slumber.
Clicking,
Thousands of worms bite
Little stings on the skin.
Fear clouds my brain again,
An evil miasma.
My light clicks off;
The night closes in.
Relief,
The moon is visible again.
The shimmering underside of the surface gimmering,
I burst out,
A meteor breaking the atmosphere,
Reaching desperately for the boat.

#8

By Matt Aldrovandi

We press onward
Slowly,
Truck lurching,
Diesel engine puffing,
Complaining of the stress.
Fog swirls
Surrounding us like volcanic ash,
Dark,
Dense,
Limiting visibility to five feet in front of us.
The fog is edible;
One could take a spoon and eat the dark gray ice cream.
Then, the gray breaks suddenly, becomes crystal clear for a second,
As though Moses has parted the Red Sea,
Such a contrast that I am taken aback.
I look to the canyon below,
Clouds floating gracefully like cream in coffee,
Spectacularly beautiful in the light of a full moon.
I look down on a surreal scene
And realize something:
We are no longer on earth.

The Lioness

By Lee Mather

The editor wishes to assure the readers that "The Lioness" is not an autobiographical piece and that author, Lee Mather, is as nice a person as can be, unlike her heroine. We hope you will read this story as it was written and was meant to be read—with humor.

I will always remember the time I was told that your way of life is compared to the type of animal that you could be. I have always compared myself to a lioness; she is graceful, quick, nothing stands in her way, and she always gets what she wants. I apply this theory to everything that I go after and to the things that I already have in my possession. The lioness always gets her prey.

I don't like to put labels on people, particularly on my boyfriend, but somehow, I do. I sometimes treat Sam as if he were in my possession. I just don't want him to find someone better than I, prettier than I, or funnier than I. *I* stimulate his thoughts, *I* make him weak in the knees with my natural beauty, and *I* make him laugh at things that others wouldn't find all that funny. *I* am a lioness—an unstoppable lioness.

We both live in Boston, but we live in different sections of the city. I live in the posh Back Bay area and the only reason I can afford a place like this is that I live with this other girl named Sherrie, whose parents pretty much pay her way. I could never afford to live here on my own, so I have to endure living with this obnoxious trust-fund bitch until I can. Hey, it's only another six months of dealing with her endless bullshit. I don't know how much more I can take, though. Girls are unpredictable and selfish little creatures. Sam lives in a Boston University fraternity house-littered community in a two-floor apartment with his younger brother and two Boston University students. They have a very nice arrangement since they are in the midst of a party nearly twenty-four hours a day. It must be nice.

As I grasped my phone with intentions of calling him, I stopped short. The monotonous voice of a male news anchor broke the silence in my room. He was talking about the death of seven people in

the Chicago area due to Tylenol laced with cyanide. I was freaking out because I had taken a couple of Tylenol that morning to ease my worries over Sam's whereabouts. I decided to go and turn that crap off before I worried myself sick.

I walked into our living room to turn on the radio, but my roommate Sherrie was sitting on the sofa listening to Olivia Newton-John's latest tape and reading some notes for an assignment of hers. Why must she always listen to that shit, I asked myself.

"Hey, you finally decided to come out of your coma, huh?"

Sherrie asked with a hint of obvious sarcasm.

"Yeah, I wanted to listen to the radio—what's it to you?" I retorted.

Sherrie looked at me condescendingly and replied, "Well, you've been so totally wrapped up with Sam and the fact that he hasn't called you in one fucking day. Cut the guy a break, seriously! Come out of your jealous little world—the guy is not cheating on you. Relax!"

"What the hell do you know? All you care about is yourself. Since when do you care about me, Sherrie?" I snarled, "You have no idea what I feel!"

"Well, you're bringing us all down," Sherrie answered snottily. "No one wants to come over anymore because you're such a downer. People will think we're so antisocial."

"God, you're so pathetic," I laughed with disbelief. "You don't even give two shits about me! All you care about is what people think of you. You're such a petty little bitch!"

I gave her the same look of disbelief and shook my head as I walked over to our coat closet to grab my jacket. Nah, I won't give her the satisfaction, I thought. I'll just go back to my room and lie down for a while.

I lay on my bed for what seemed like hours, just thinking about Sam. We had been dating for nearly five months, and we were completely in that established relationship place. I kept a toothbrush and tampons in his bathroom just in case. We called each other before we went to bed. We had met each other's families and were forced to spend prolonged periods of time with them. I thought of the things that attracted me to him, such as his muscular build, his endearing blue

eyes, and his virile-yet-sensitive disposition. I reached for my date book to make sure that it had been a day since we had last spoken—yup, it was September 18, 1982. I reached for my phone again and contemplated calling him. I stared at the keypad until the phone began to make that obnoxious staccato noise that warns you when the phone has been off the hook for too long. I hung the phone up with feelings of discontent and fear of the unknown. What if that female roommate of his is hitting on him? I thought, I hate that bitch—who the fuck is she to live with three other guys? It didn't seem normal to me. She's stealing Sam's attention from me, I thought. I'm sure of it—I hate her. My thoughts were turning to jealous rage, and I wished I could just push her over their second-floor balcony. Why did I hate her so much?

I felt my thoughts deteriorate as I began to drift off to sleep. My slumber was interrupted by Sherrie's incessant knocking on my door.

"Hey, I'm going to the store. Want anything?" Sherrie called through my door.

"No, I'm fine. Can I go back to sleep now?" I answered impatiently.

"God, I was just trying to be considerate. Fuck you!" Sherrie yelled as she walked briskly towards the main door. I heard her slam it, and I sighed with an unusual combination of disgust and relief.

I decided to walk back out into the living room and doze off on the sofa. I turned on the radio and lowered its volume so that I could fall asleep. My moment of solitude was broken by the sharp ring of the telephone. I jolted and ran towards it in hopes of the caller being Sam.

"Hello?" I asked with anticipation.

"Hey baby, it's me," the caller answered. "It's Sam."

"Oh. Hey, Hon. I was worried." I said in a manner that I hoped would get my impatience across to him.

"Why? What's up? What for?" Sam replied. "You know I love you and I think about you all the time. You're my only girl."

Yeah, right, I thought to myself. That remark dripped with deceit. It didn't appear as a term of endearment, but he probably meant it to be. I'm just crazy.

"Sam, can you come over? We need to talk," I said in a quavering voice. "It's important, and I've missed you so much. I feel like I don't have a boyfriend anymore—well, what I meant to say was that I don't

think we spend enough time together." I completely regretted that last statement as soon as those words had rolled off my tongue.

"I guess I could, but I really don't have much time. I'm going out with the guys to the Shamrock tonight. We're gonna try to win tickets for the John Cougar show—they're giving them away there in some contest—wouldn't that be fun?" Sam asked in a hopeful voice. "And what do you mean you don't think we spend enough time together?"

"I'll tell you when you come over, OK?" I answered impatiently.

"Yeah, I'll be over in a half-hour, alright baby?" Sam replied.

"Alright, I love you," I said in order to close the conversation and prevent wasting more time on the phone. We said goodbye and I turned up the radio to perk myself up a bit. I really hoped that this would turn out well, and I was well prepared for what I would say to him. He deserved to hear the truth—who doesn't?

I decided to tidy up a bit because our place was a bit littered with empty beer cans from a small get-together that we had held the night before. God forbid that Sherrie help clean up, I thought. It was her idea to have the party in the first place. That girl wouldn't lift a finger for anything. I grabbed a trash bag to pick up the empties, then I tossed it by the trash can in our kitchen. I went to the cupboard and got down on my hands and knees to search for our can of Lemon Pledge, so I could do some spot-dusting. I found it and I began to go around the living room. I thought, it's only Sam—he won't care what our place looks like. He just wants to see me—I mean, I've seen his place at its worst because he didn't even make the slightest effort to clean up after one of their monstrous keg parties. The thought of it made me think of how he went on and on about how much that bitch he lives with drank that night. Big fucking deal, so she had five beers—I could drink that bitch under the table. I don't care if she's a freshman and I'm a senior. This made me scrub at a side table with my dust cloth really hard, and I was surprised that I didn't wear the lacquer off. I'll tell him how I feel about her, I thought.

My favorite song of the moment came on the radio and distracted me from my jealous rage. I began to belt out the lyrics and dance around the room a bit.

"I never meant to be so bad to you,

*One thing I said that I would never do,
One look at you and I would fall from grace,
And that would wipe the smile right from my face...
Do you remember when we used to dance,
And incidents arose from circumstance—*

The feeling of Sam's arms around my waist cut off my singing. "Sam!" I exclaimed, "You're early! You scared the shit out of me!" I walked over to the radio and turned it down.

Sam grinned and his eyes sparkled mischievously. "I know," he said coyly, "I couldn't wait to see you. Don't I get a kiss?"

"Hmmmm...nah, maybe later," I replied jokingly. "Just kidding, come here, you."

I sighed deeply as his lips touched mine. His breath reeked of cigarettes, and it was gross. I never understood what possesses people to smoke cigarettes and enjoy it.

"Sam, come sit down here with me. I want to talk to you about something," I insisted. "Oh, do you want something to drink—beer, wine, juice? Actually, on second thought, we better leave alcohol out of this conversation."

"Nah, I'm all set, babe. What's this all about?" Sam asked.

"Well, it's about your living situation. I'm not comfortable with it. It's also about the fact that it seems like we never spend any quality time together anymore," I stated. "Why is Jenny living with the three of you?"

"Ohhhhhh, please, not this bullshit again," Sam groaned. "I told you—she has a boyfriend. I am not interested in her. There is only one woman for me who's right for me, and that's you."

I looked at him with disdain. "Yeah, could've fooled me. All you do is talk about Jenny and how great she is. Why don't you just go and fuck her?" I exclaimed.

The radio seemed to be coordinated with our argument. It was the strangest occurrence, and it was really eerie:

*"Jenny Jenny, you're the girl for me,
You don't know me but you make me so happy..."*

Sam was shocked at my statement. "What?" he cried. "Are you

insane? I think you are! I seriously don't understand where you're getting all of this from!"

I scoffed. "Well, let me just help you out, then!" I answered hotly, "This is what you said to me on Sunday—you said that I had missed *such a great party* and that Jenny was so impressive with her drinking. BIG DEAL! SHE HAD FIVE BEERS!"

"I am getting really tired of this conversation. Is this what you had me come over for? To go over the same old shit? There is nothing you can do. She's going to be living there, and you are just going to have to deal with it! She is a nice person and she hasn't done anything to you. Why do you have such a problem with her? You don't have a problem with the guys—I mean, what the fuck is it?" Sam exclaimed. "I love you and I don't think that anything should ruin what we have together—as far as I'm concerned, Jenny is not an issue. Can we PLEASE let this go?"

I sniffled a bit. "You really don't like her?" I asked as I walked to the bathroom to get a tissue to blow my nose.

Sam sighed and said, "No...I mean, I like her as a roommate, but I don't like her romantically. Come on! She's nowhere near what you are. You're everything that I want in a woman—your attitude, your body, your face—what more could I possibly want? My family adores you. My little sister has never liked my girlfriends, but she likes you. You make me so happy, but I can't stand how jealous you can get sometimes. It's a really ugly side of you. I love you...please know and understand that I LOVE YOU."

I gave him a crooked half-smile with misty eyes. "OK," I replied softly. "I'm sorry. You know that I love you too, right?"

"Well, yeah," he laughed. "Just don't pull that shit with me. Come here." He pulled me towards his body and we hugged tightly. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and Polo cologne seemed so comforting at that moment, even though I always told him that all he needed was one spray of the stuff.

"Come lie down with me," I said suggestively. "Let's take a nap."

"Mmmmm, OK," he agreed. He took my hand and followed close behind me as we walked to my room.

Sam kicked off his shoes and climbed into my bed beside me.

*One thing I said that I would never do,
One look at you and I would fall from grace,
And that would wipe the smile right from my face...
Do you remember when we used to dance,
And incidents arose from circumstance—"*

The feeling of Sam's arms around my waist cut off my singing. "Sam!" I exclaimed, "You're early! You scared the shit out of me!" I walked over to the radio and turned it down.

Sam grinned and his eyes sparkled mischievously. "I know," he said coyly, "I couldn't wait to see you. Don't I get a kiss?"

"Hmmm...nah, maybe later," I replied jokingly. "Just kidding, come here, you."

I sighed deeply as his lips touched mine. His breath reeked of cigarettes, and it was gross. I never understood what possesses people to smoke cigarettes and enjoy it.

"Sam, come sit down here with me. I want to talk to you about something," I insisted. "Oh, do you want something to drink—beer, wine, juice? Actually, on second thought, we better leave alcohol out of this conversation."

"Nah, I'm all set, babe. What's this all about?" Sam asked.

"Well, it's about your living situation. I'm not comfortable with it. It's also about the fact that it seems like we never spend any quality time together anymore," I stated. "Why is Jenny living with the three of you?"

"Ohhhhh, please, not this bullshit again," Sam groaned. "I told you—she has a boyfriend. I am not interested in her. There is only one woman for me who's right for me, and that's you."

I looked at him with disdain. "Yeah, could've fooled me. All you do is talk about Jenny and how great she is. Why don't you just go and fuck her?" I exclaimed.

The radio seemed to be coordinated with our argument. It was the strangest occurrence, and it was really eerie:

*"Jenny Jenny, you're the girl for me,
You don't know me but you make me so happy..."*

Sam was shocked at my statement. "What?" he cried. "Are you

insane? I think you are! I seriously don't understand where you're getting all of this from!"

I scoffed. "Well, let me just help you out, then!" I answered hotly, "This is what you said to me on Sunday—you said that I had missed *such a great party* and that Jenny was so impressive with her drinking. BIG DEAL! SHE HAD FIVE BEERS!"

"I am getting really tired of this conversation. Is this what you had me come over for? To go over the same old shit? There is nothing you can do. She's going to be living there, and you are just going to have to deal with it! She is a nice person and she hasn't done anything to you. Why do you have such a problem with her? You don't have a problem with the guys—I mean, what the fuck is it?" Sam exclaimed. "I love you and I don't think that anything should ruin what we have together—as far as I'm concerned, Jenny is not an issue. Can we PLEASE let this go?"

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Sam kicked off his shoes and climbed into my bed beside me.

We positioned ourselves so that I laid with my back to his front. His burly arms draped over me as if he were about to actually take a nap. He's such a fool, I thought, how could he actually believe that I want to take a *nap*? Doesn't he get the meaning of that word by now?

"Ha ha, nice try there, big boy," I whispered sexily into his ear as I climbed on top of him and pinned his arms down behind him. "What do you think you're doing?"

Sam gazed up at me quizzically with a half-smile. "Ohhhhhh, so that's your meaning of 'Let's take a nap,'" he said and trailed off. "Um...I wasn't aware of that."

"Well, come on, let's go. You and I both know we need it bad and you also know very well that we can outdo anybody a hundred times over." I begged, "We need it, and you can't tell me that we don't."

Sam grinned. "Yeah, all right. Show me what you've got."

Ten minutes passed and we were well into our daily routine. We usually didn't talk much during sex, and today was no exception. I started to wonder what it was that kept us together, and the answer became quite clear to me. Sex was the glue of our relationship. I wasn't really all that interested in him as a person—he served more as a plaything or a possession. My sexual possession, I thought. He was nothing but a toy that I liked to play with. He was sort of like my favorite doll growing up—broken-in, always with me, and doesn't talk back.

We kept going like it was going out of style, and I controlled the movements, of course. I love it how we always do stuff my way, I thought. Sam was really into it and dishing out the coital compliments, but I could only give him courtesy responses at that point. All I kept thinking about was how I had so much power over him and how much I loved it, no matter how insecure I was on the inside. I knew that it was a way to conceal my insecurity, a part of me that would never be revealed to anyone.

We finished and I collapsed on top of him, completely exhausted. I must have been working harder than usual. A few minutes later, I rolled off him and lay there with my chest heaving because I couldn't catch my breath. Sam sat up and reached for his cigarettes in order to have his vital post-sex smoke. My thoughts went back to the image of the lioness—lean, graceful, and tough. I glanced over at Sam and thought, I got my prey, and there is no way that he will ever get away.

The Hike

By Nicole Asselin

The sun rose over the rolling green hills of Pennsylvania. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the sun was blazing. July in Pennsylvania was known for its extreme temperature changes. One day it would be sweltering, and the next day a sweatshirt would be needed. This particular day was one of those perfect in-between days, not too hot, and not too cold.

Noelle Matthews leaned out the sliding doors at the back of her house and felt the sun's intense rays hit her skin. Home on summer break from Boston University, Noelle seized the opportunity to spend this gorgeous day outside. She immediately dashed to the phone and called her best friend, Jason, to beg him to go hiking with her.

"Come on Jason! You have to do something with me! We should go hiking or something. Did you look outside? It's gorgeous!" Noelle said into the phone. "It's a perfect day, and I know for a fact you don't have to work today. So, there's really no way you can turn me down."

Jason sighed. "Fine! If you really want me to go, I will. I'll just have you know, I was going to spend the day sleeping." He smiled at Noelle's frustrated sigh. "It'll probably do me some good to get out of the house anyway. Just give me an hour, and I'll come by and pick you up. Is that cool?"

"Jason, you are so awesome. It'll be great! I would've been so bored here at the house by myself. I would've probably ended up cleaning or something horrible like that. See you in an hour!" Noelle laughed as she hung up the phone.

Jason and Noelle had been best friends from back in high school. They had met through mutual friends and had hit it off immediately. Noelle felt stifled by the small-town atmosphere of the little town she had grown up in, so she had decided to get out when she chose a college. Noelle had moved to Boston for school, and her friendship with Jason had changed. Since they didn't get a chance to



Stephanie Moskal

hang out as much, they had to rely on random phone calls and the Internet. They still tried to keep their friendship afloat by keeping each other up-to-date on the things going on in their lives.

About an hour after Noelle had hung up the phone, she heard a car pull up into her driveway. She looked out the window, saw Jason's Honda, and ran out the door before her dog could start barking at the strange car in her driveway. Jason was just walking up the sidewalk to her front door when she came out.

"Ready to do some hiking?" Noelle asked grinning as they walked to his parked car and got in. "I'm terribly sorry if I kept you from your busy day of sleeping, but I felt you needed some color. You are looking quite pale. I think you've been spending too much time playing video games." Noelle started to laugh at her own humor, about which Jason shot her an annoyed look.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, as his face started to break into a grin. He slowly pulled his car out of her driveway. "That's okay. You're right anyway. I mean, not about the video games, but about getting outside. It's such a great day; I love days like this. Plus, it lets me spend more time with you. I never get to see you any more since you decided to go to school way up north; I miss having you home." He glanced over at her with a smile on his face.

"I know," Noelle said somberly. "That's why we have to spend so much time together this summer." She continued on, teasing Jason. "That way we can get sick of each other now, and then it won't be so bad when I go back to Boston."

Jason flashed a grin over to Noelle as they drove down the highway. They locked eyes, and for a moment, Noelle noticed something. She had actually started to think Jason was kind of cute.

I wonder what it would be like if we were dating, Noelle thought to herself as she stared out the car window at the scenery that was flying by. But she quickly dashed that thought out of her mind. Whoa, where did that come from? We're just friends. I mean, at times it seems like we're dating, but we're just really close.

"Hello? Noelle are you still with me?" Jason inquired, interrupting her internal argument. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and waved a hand in front of her face as he pulled off the highway and entered the park.

"Huh? What? Oh...yeah...sorry...umm...for a second I was in my own little world, I guess," Noelle responded, shaking her head to clear her mind of her crazy thoughts.

"Yeah, right. Come on...what were you thinking about? I promise I won't tell anybody," Jason grinned, cocking his head in her direction as they pulled into the parking lot at the base of Pole's Steeple.

"Don't you worry," Noelle smiled secretively. "It wasn't anything bad about you. I tell you all that bad stuff to your face anyway."

"Oh gee," Jason said sarcastically smiling at her. "You're such a great friend for that."

Jason parked the car and they both hopped out. They got all their hiking gear on, sneakers and bottles of water, and began their journey to the top of Pole's Steeple. Pole's Steeple was located deep within the Pine Grove Furnace State Park in central Pennsylvania. No one really knew why the top of the mountain was known as Pole's Steeple, but it didn't change the fact that the area was beautiful.

The sun was shining brightly on the pair as they walked to the foot of the path. The incline wasn't too steep, so even inexperienced hikers could navigate the trail. The two walked in silence for a while, just enjoying the beautiful scenery of the park.

"AAAAHHHH!" Noelle screamed as she pitched backwards and fell on her backside amidst the trees. "What the hell was that?"

Jason jumped as she screamed and turned around quickly. He ran over to her side as she brushed dirt off her hands. "Oh God, Noelle, are you okay?" he asked as he stood over her, trying to hold his laughter in. "That branch totally came out of nowhere and tripped you."

Noelle laughed sarcastically from her seat on the hard ground. "Ha ha, Mr. Comedian. Don't just stand there. Help me up!" When Jason stood there laughing even harder, she started to look around for other people. "Geez...what's a girl got to do to get some help down here?"

Jason bent down and offered her his hand. She gingerly placed her own in his and allowed herself to be pulled up off the ground. At that first touch, Noelle's world seemed to stop. The birds stopped singing, the trees stopped swaying, and the world stood still. She gazed

up into a set of sparkling blue eyes. Those sparkling blue eyes gazed intensely back at her. Her hand felt warm where it was still grasped in his.

They stood face to face, hand in hand, for what seemed like an eternity to Noelle. Then, they pulled apart suddenly, and the spell broke. The pair awkwardly began their trip again.

"Well...umm...yeah...are you sure you're okay? You took a pretty nasty fall back there," Jason asked in a halting sentence. He was looking everywhere but at Noelle's face.

Noelle stared in confusion at his back. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a little shaken up, but nothing too horrible." She glanced down quickly at her feet as she navigated her way over tree branches and rocks.

As they continued their trip, hindered by Noelle's cautiousness, she glanced at Jason. She was still dazed from the fall she had taken, but she was also confused as to what had just happened between her and Jason. She wondered if she had imagined the whole thing.

I wonder if he felt anything too? Should I say something? But what if he didn't feel the same connection I did? I don't want him to think that I'm reading too much into things, Noelle thought to herself as she hiked up behind Jason.

After about fifteen minutes of traveling in awkward silence, they came up to the part of the hike that involved a little rock climbing. Noelle looked up at the formation of rocks and immediately forgot her dilemma.

"There is no way I'm going to climb that!" Noelle said, as she stared in disbelief at the structure of rocks they had to climb over to get to the scenic overlook. "I didn't know we had to risk our lives on this hike! I guess it's time we turned back." She turned and waited for Jason to start down the path with her. When he didn't follow, she turned around expectantly. "Well, are you coming?"

Jason laughed at her reluctance to climb the rocks and teased her about her fear. "Are you kidding me? This is nothing!" He looked up at the rocks and shook his head. "You'll be fine. I'll even help you along the trail. You go in front of me. That way if you fall, I'll be able to catch you." He glanced at her expectantly and ushered her forward.

Noelle took a deep breath and glanced at the rocks again. "Fine! But if I fall, I'll blame you." She cautiously approached the bottom of the for-



Devin Bousquet

mation. This section of the hike consisted of a rocky trail almost vertical in its length. The rocks were close together and only allowed one person to pass through at a time. This made Noelle even more nervous. She quickly gathered up her courage, took another deep breath, and started to climb up the rocky path with Jason following close behind. As they continued up the path, Noelle's fear started to lessen. She actually started to have a good time climbing the rocks while Jason encouraged her from behind.

The pair made it up through the path and came out at the scenic overlook. Noelle made a sound of excitement as she looked over the edge of the rocks and breathed in the crisp July air. Up on the top of the mountain, there was a fresh breeze blowing through the trees that she had never felt before. She surveyed the scene that was laid out before her. All she could see for miles and miles were trees. She felt as if she was on the edge of the earth as she looked over the beautiful area. She turned back around and found Jason staring at her. When they made eye contact for the second time that afternoon, Noelle felt a zap of electricity straight through to her soul.

Jason moved closer to Noelle, and she moved closer to him as if pulled by an invisible force she couldn't name. She was in a dream-like state, completely powerless over what was happening. They got closer and closer until they were standing face-to-face, toe-to-toe. Jason looked deep into her eyes and leaned forward. He slowly pressed his lips against hers, and she responded to it as if she had never been kissed before. She felt electric currents coursing through her body. Never in her life had she felt anything so strong. She slowly felt herself melting.

Out of nowhere, he pulled away and stared at her. He pushed himself further away from her and turned around. Noelle felt his distance and stared at his back in confusion. Jason turned back and looked at her with an unreadable expression on his face. He glanced down at his hands and opened his mouth a few times as if he were trying to find the right words to say.

"Noelle," he began. "I don't want to ruin our friendship."

With those few words, Noelle's heart dropped to her toes. She quickly looked down at her feet, and tried to hold in the tears that were springing to her eyes. Why am I so upset about this, she thought. Was I really expecting something to happen? She gathered in a quick couple



Eileen Carroll

of breaths and willed herself to calm down. No big deal, right? We'll just stick to being friends. I mean, that shouldn't be too hard. Just because I have some different feelings for him now doesn't mean I have to cut him out of my life totally.

Jason sighed and came closer to Noelle. "Noelle, I know you probably don't feel the same way, but I need to say this. When we just kissed, I felt something. I don't know if you felt it too, but it was pretty strong on my side." He threw his hands up in frustration and turned his back on her again before Noelle could say anything. "I just don't know if I want us to risk our friendship if we start something. Noelle, you are my best friend, and I couldn't stand it if you were out of my life. At the same time, I really want to find out what it would be like. You know, me and you." With that, Jason went up and stood in front of Noelle's face. He leaned close and searched her face. "What are you thinking?"

Noelle looked up into Jason's eyes. She tried to gather all her thoughts into coherent sentences, but for some reason, the words just weren't coming to her. For the first time in her life, she had been rendered speechless. Noelle stood staring into Jason's eyes for only a couple of moments, but it felt like hours in her mind. Noelle kept staring at Jason and opened her mouth a few times. Still, nothing came out.

Then, Noelle had an epiphany. Actions speak louder than words, she thought to herself. She knew what she had to do. As Jason searched her face for a response, she leaned forward and pressed her lips softly against his. He made a sound of surprise and then responded to her kiss. She pulled herself away, "How's that for an answer?"

A Classic Ensemble

By Jim Mara

As he lay stiff in his finest suit, I couldn't help but think of all the clothes he'd left behind.

His closet was immaculate. Its size used to intimidate me as a child.

Once I got past the enormity, what was inside

was what was really impressive.

The organization and tidiness were impeccable

Every piece was cared for; nothing was ever neglected.

The garments were extremely rare and had intangible value.

At first glance, they were nothing out of the ordinary.

Upon closer inspection, one discovered

the materials were very fine-threaded

and delicate at the same time.

After being exposed

to several ensembles,

anyone with taste grew to appreciate

just how special this collection was—

the warmth of those sweaters, the silliness

of those Hawaiian shirts. Any seamstress would have done anything

to hold them. His closet was so vast and diverse; I was always envious.

At times in my youth, I foolishly felt that my britches

were getting too small for me. Trying on a pair of his pants,

I quickly understood I still had a great deal of growing to do.

How could the family

put all these valuable outfits to use?

How could I wear such commodities with the same style and grace?

His shoes were way too big. There were so many hats to wear.

In the end, I proudly accepted some items, but I had to let the rest go.

Buying a new wardrobe was a much more comfortable fit.

Hold On

By Tim Harrity

Bang, Bang, Bang.
The sound won't leave my head.
It haunts my dreams
And disturbs my thoughts.

Bang, Bang, Bang.
To see you on top of the world
Falling off
In a matter of seconds.

Bang, Bang, Bang
To see you lie there,
No strength, no will to survive.
Where did it all go?

I sit here four years later thinking
Where has the time gone?
Are you still with me?

If you can see me now
(Maybe you can)
Are you still with me?

These past four years have been for you,
Dedicated in your memory.
I'm still with you...

Bang! Bang! Bang!
"Oh, shit! I'm here, Dog
Stay with me.
You hear 'em? They're comin', Dog...Hold on."



Poc Pundarick

Child Hood

By Shakir Shabazz

Born and raised in the Lower East,
You see, we used to run the streets,
And now when our kids go out, they wanna run the streets.
It ain't nuthin sweet. It's lemons, in fact.
All day's a summer league here
Pitching heroin and crack,
And next up at bat, another victim.
My brother told me that guns are like stamps.
If you cop 'em, you gotta lick 'em
Sooner or later. Most chances are sooner than later.
Father time's asking, "When you coming home, son?"
Sooner or later.
I chose the back route.
Meanwhile, my brother pulled the guns out,
A warrior on the bench until he maxed out
Mafia-style; modeled his game after Joe Peschi,
20-inch rims skated on ice like Wayne Gretzky,
A gambling man feeling luck roll the dice!
But the only thing, the price he'll have to pay
Will be his life.

Childhood

By Tim Harrity

Most of our days were spent playing stick ball
Unless we were at the school yard playing kick ball,
1st base a red Buick, 2nd a manhole,
3rd a wax spot where some kid died and they burned a
bunch of candles.
We would play for hours 'till our parents would yell from doors
and windows.
The older kids stood on the corner puffin' endo.
As we grew older, our sports began to change.
We played ball and hustled dimes to cop some new kicks or a new
chain.
Wasn't long before we made ourselves a new name.
On top of our game, we couldn't be stopped,
And by then, we had our whole block on lock.
Now, we were the older kids standin' on the corner.
From stop sign to stop sign, all you could smell was marijuana.
No matter the order, we could serve it.
Pockets full of money, Mom questioned how I earned it.
My best friend died over bullshit (he didn't deserve it)
All because of the life we chose,
The hunger for new Jordans and name-brand clothes.
I would give it all up now if I could,
Only to relive my childhood.

A Brother's Dream

By Meghan Cary

The brisk fall wind bites my skin.
The breeze is strong.
Who is to know when
The first snowstorm will come.

You are gone from this physical space,
Yet I know your soul is not far.
Months after, I still cannot come to face
That I will never see a new painting from your heart,

A painting of the leaves
Steadily falling to the ground.
They turn from green to orange to brown.
Now I know that winter is coming.

I look up as clouds start to form
And the air becomes moist.
Even now, God mourns.
A single dry tear falls from my eye.

Even though we are apart,
You are still my brother.
You will always be in my heart
While I keep living your dream with mine.

A Newfound Me at Newfound Lake

By Emily Pelletier

We arrived at the cottage on Newfound Lake in New Hampshire by car, just after dusk. There were five of us singing, "What do you do with a drunken sailor?" at the top of our lungs. We sounded like fisherman, happy to be back from a long trip. In reality we were beginning our week-long vacation. Rita, our lab-collie, ran from the car and began jumping around and barking as if she had a thorn in her foot—so happy to see us. We were excited to be on vacation at the lake for the fifth summer.

Four cars pulled up behind us, and twenty people of all sizes and shapes poured out to meet and greet everyone. We were like noisy birds flocking together.

Our family is just one-fifth of all the families that make up our wonderful summer experience. Four families join us, as well as parts of other families. Without each other, the summer experience would not hold the same enticement.

The cottage we stay in looks like a fish shack. It's a box with two bedrooms and a comfy futon, which doubles as a TV room. The roof forms an upside down "V," and the walls are mostly big old baggy screens. There are fishing rods leaning on the side of the house. The other families have cottages of their own. Each cottage has its own unique qualities, but none holds the same enchantment as the "fish shack."

This year, I was as excited as I am when I wake up on Easter morning and begin the hunt for my special basket. I had a warm and fuzzy feeling of anticipation in my stomach. I could hardly wait to hug my cousins, unpack my bathing suit and race to the raft! Oh, what a feeling!

During the four previous summers, I had felt much differently. I was nervous. I couldn't interact with anybody but the small children. I have struggled with manic-depressive illness since the age of fourteen. Because of this, I lacked confidence in who I was. Many of my relatives didn't understand my illness and were apprehensive around me. This made me feel different and very uncomfortable around many of

my aunts and uncles. I truly believed that they saw and treated me differently. Because of this, I had my special places where I could go, and I rarely ventured beyond them when we were on vacation. They were the fish shack, my dad's boat, Auntie Donna's cottage and Uncle Jiggsy's cottage.

For the past two years, I have worked very hard to be comfortable with who I am, and because of this, this year I could really appreciate the beauty of the cottage and my family.

I ran to the fish shack, and in a flash, put my bathing suit on. All my cousins did the same. We met at the beach for our first trip to the raft. The water seemed to glisten at the touch. As my toes reached the water, the edge felt like warm milk that grandmothers make their grandchildren when they can't sleep. Each year, my aunts and uncle toss another cousin at me to teach him or her to swim. This year, the big challenge was to get William to swim to the raft without his life jacket. William had the ability, but he was like a bird unwilling to leave the nest for the first time. I had worked previously with William and felt he was almost ready. The setting of the lake was perfect for a test run. After everyone had taken his or her first trip to the raft, including William with his life jacket, we sat and talked. I had so much fun swimming and playing water games with my cousins.

One of the special things about this summer was that my dad had brought a Hobie cat sailboat for me to practice my sailing. He made it very clear that it was for our family to learn how to sail again. My crazy Uncle Jiggsy had two bright orange buoys the size of extra large melons, and he developed a plan to use his boat to place the buoys in a racecourse-like fashion out on the lake. Uncle Jiggsy and my brother Mike would be one team and Dad and I would be the other. We would be timed on how fast we turned through the buoys and back. My father is very competitive and was swearing and yelling at me. I was very proud of myself because I kept my cool and told him how I felt. With each race we got better, and we were able to work together to get better times. If this had happened during a previous summer, I would have stopped after the first race, and both of us would have lost out. It was another wonderful experience!

During mealtimes, everyone would flock over to the fish shack. Everyone takes turns feeding the masses. All the meals melt in your

mouth. Here, we not only eat, but we also share stories, and then we clean up and head over to the fireplace. Sometimes we make somemores, but all the time, we sing. The smaller kids play "kick the can."

My family is very important to me. This summer tradition reminds me of birds that gather together in flocks each summer to protect their hatchlings. Birds flock together to travel south in the fall while my family flocks together every summer and travels north, where we regroup and re-familiarize ourselves with each other. We do this to remember the things that are important in life. Life is fast and much too busy. During the year, we try to make time for each other, but that is not always possible. That is why we cherish our time together at the Newfound Lake.



Devin Bousquet

Song of a New Life

By Christine Ralston

I've felt the pain of life
And I've seen the days gone by.
I have asked eternal questions
And often wondered why.
I know not what's in front of me.
Never felt this way before.
Not certain what has brought me here,
Where I'm going I'm not sure.

Refrain

Please don't weep beside me.
I might be better off this way.
One day you'll come to find me,
But for now, just live each day.
I was a life crusader
Who tried to do what was right.
Now welcomed into the Lord's hands,
I safely sleep the night.

Refrain

Refrain: Your heart will love always.
Your heart will live forever.
Your heart is what has given life
To our love together.

It's my heart that shares your laughter.
It's my heart that dries your tears.
It's my heart that will forever be
Through all your passing years.

Weighty Issues

By Katharine Panza

We learn different life lessons from our parents. Children form a self-image that is often based on the image their parents have of themselves. This has been especially true for my mother and me. My mother was always slightly over weight as a child and because her mother had constantly put her on diets, she vowed to never bother her children about their weight or eating habits. While she has been a great mother, and very understanding about a lot of issues I have had to face, she has always watched my weight instead of taking care of herself. Growing up, my mother never told my younger brother, Joe, or I what to eat, and if we wanted to have an Oreo ten minutes before dinner, that was our choice. My brother is lucky enough to be skinny, and I guess boys don't have to deal with as many weight issues as girls, anyway. My mother comes from a critical family, and although she is less critical than my aunt and their mother, she makes a comment about my appearance every time I see her. She has always done this. Even when I lived at home, she did it every single day. This was very annoying.

Although I have never had a weight problem, I am short—just barely 5'1"—and I have always weighed in the 120s. One time, when I was at the doctor's for a sinus infection, the doctor asked how much I weighed. I was still in high school, so my mother had come into the office with me. When I said 124, my mom got a horrified look on her face. "Katharine, that is way too much for you to weigh," she said. Two emotions came over me immediately. First, I was pissed off at my mom for telling me what I shouldn't weigh when she didn't even know the average weight for a person my age or height. Then, I was annoyed because she doesn't watch her own weight at all and at this point was at least 60 pounds overweight. I personally have never said anything to her because I have always thought it was her own choice whether or not to lose weight.

The rest of her family has always been critical of her, even to the point of telling my brother and me to watch her weight. It is ridiculous. We feel badly that our mother had to deal with this from her own mother. I always have known I wouldn't want anyone to tell me to lose

weight, even if I needed to because I would feel bad enough about being overweight.

My mother has tried many diets over the years, and for some reason, has never stuck to them. My aunt has tried telling me why she thinks my mother has never lost weight: she says it is because my mother feels she is being denied something if she can't eat whatever food she wants to. Personally, even though I see where my aunt is coming from and partly agree, I don't think that is the entire reason for my mother not staying on the diets. Why she continues to go on and off diets I really don't know, except that some people have more will power and self-control than others.

One time, shortly after my return home from college for the summer, my mom told me she thought I had fat arms and could lose some weight. Now, I had lost a little weight during my freshman year and wanted to lose some more that summer, but I hadn't thought that I was particularly fat; I just wanted to be healthier. I couldn't believe she was saying this! I was ready to kill her; well not really, but I was pretty mad. Later she told me I had no right to be mad. She just wanted me to be thinner because if I was only five pounds overweight now and lost it, then I would always be in the position of maintaining my current weight in order to stay healthy. When I get mad at people, I can be very unforgiving, and I didn't want to say something back to my mom about her weight that I would regret later. So I continued to be pissed for the rest of the day.

After thinking about it for a while, I decided that my mother just needed to make herself feel better by concentrating on me. I knew it was stupid to not confront her, but at the same time, I was not about to say something to offend her. I am not the confrontational type and don't like it when people are mad at me. My aunt told me to ignore her, and my friends tried to help me figure why my mother was concentrating on my weight loss, which started very quickly after I began *WeightWatchers*. I didn't actually join *WeightWatchers*. I took the book from my grandma and followed the points system loosely, except when I ate the frozen meals that have the points figured out for you. I found out later that I was taking in twice the amount of protein when I ate chicken, steak, or other meat, yet I still lost weight. My mother kept telling me she didn't like that diet, but she went on it herself for a

day or two after I went back to school. Obviously, she must have been jealous. I was losing weight, and she wanted to try it herself.

However, my mother still doesn't try to exercise or eat a healthy diet. She thinks just because she has a piece of fruit, that it should be a cause for her to lose weight. I guess I can't be totally sure that she was jealous of me, but I know it must have hurt her to see me being successful on the diet she had failed at so many times. This brought up another question. Should I go off my diet and eat badly to make her feel better but have to listen to her comments if I started to look like I was gaining weight? I decided that I would not mention how many points I had eaten that day or say anything like, "I can't eat raviolis for dinner. They are 11 points!" I just chose to eat only a small amount or grab a sandwich sometimes after work instead of eating at home. I would not give up my diet just to make her feel better.

During this time, my mom would say, "Wow, you look great!" I thought I was doing well, but I never ate as little as I wanted to. I did end up losing 12 pounds over the course of the summer, which I was pretty proud of. My mom praised me but told me I could lose more. I was barely under 120, and I looked great. But when my mom saw me, she said, "You should try to see if you can be under 115!" Of course, I thought to myself, she wishes she weighed under 115. Therefore, she is focusing on my progress and weight.

Since coming back to school I have lost more weight from walking around and doing sit-ups. I eat healthier, but I have not stayed on my diet. During the last three-day weekend when I went home, my mother told me I looked great and pointed it out to my entire family, which was fine with me, but some of my relatives told me I shouldn't lose any more. They know I watch my weight, but I am not on a diet right now; I am just trying to eat better than I have in the past.

Weight is something most Americans worry about. Our entire country typically eats an unhealthy diet. Heart disease is the number-one killer, yet we continue to regularly eat fast food that is high in saturated fat and cholesterol. I, too, eat fast food, but not very often. I think the reason for this is because Americans can't seem to do anything in moderation. We drive gas-guzzling cars, do not have as much public transportation as European countries, and although more people smoke in Europe and there is no drinking age, they still have fewer deaths due to cancers and heart problems. My mother, I feel, is a per-

fect example of this lack of moderation.

Despite the fact that she is constantly watching my weight, my mother has always been there for me when I have needed her. She has always been understanding, whether I was failing a class or needed her advice on something that was bothering me. I think it is strange how parents try to avoid being like their own parents; then, they end up doing the exact same thing. My mom said that she had a lot of memories of her father taking her places and doing things together, but when she was older, he was very concentrated on her weight. Even though he was sick with Parkinson's disease for many years and towards the last few, didn't remember things, he always seemed to remember to ask my mother if she had lost weight. My mother recently told me that she felt her father had ruined their relationship to a point where she was almost relieved when he died. (When he did die, she was upset, but she had seen him suffer from Parkinson's for many years and had been preparing for his death for a long time.)

When I was growing up, my mother wasn't always telling me I was overweight, but now that I have lost some weight, she refers to me before I went on my diet as "chubby." When we were in a store recently, she pulled a shirt off the rack and said, "Now that you're skinny, you can wear this." I was very insulted, but I just replied, "I wasn't fat." She chose to ignore me. We have had several incidents like this one, and every time, I just roll my eyes because I feel I can't say anything mean about her weight back to her.

I don't see myself confronting this issue any time soon. It's something that I don't know how to resolve. Even though I know everyone worries about their weight, I often wonder if I worry more than other people do. Due to the fact that I grew up in a family obsessed by weight, I believe I am naturally conditioned to think about it more. I know that, for my entire life, I will think about my weight and fight to have a healthy body image. I have also thought about how I will raise my kids. I hope I will not concentrate on my children's eating habits, but instead, help them develop a healthy self-image. I hope to focus on what my children are good at and encourage them to accept themselves however they are.

Afraid to Sneeze on the Train

By Paul J. Lawlor

The doors slide closed
and immediately I have to
sneeze.

I just heard on the radio
this morning
that illness is more likely to be
passed from person
to person during
the winter months
because more people are
packed into closed spaces
to avoid the cold
weather.

That means one of
these people gave
me this sneeze
sometime during the last week.

Look me in the eye, dammit.
Was it you? Who was it?

All I have to
do is
delay the sneeze
for a few more seconds.
I get off at the next
stop anyway.
And conveniently
I travel the furthest
distance between two
stops on the red line.
I should just let it fly.

Put it
back in the air
and maybe I'll hit
the motherfucker who got
me.

Of course, then I'd be
responsible for taking down
a half dozen other people
as well.

If one sneeze is that powerful
as to infect so many others.
Then there's the possibility that

I can assist in stopping
the spread of such a nuisance.
That's a good idea.
Stop passing it back
and forth and
maybe it will die
out.

And they say there's
no cure for
the common cold.

So, I exhale
through my nose and
move the tickle away
from the trigger
until I'm outside
and no one's
around.

AFTER THOUGHTS

By Brendan Boyd

After reading those few lines,
I would never think of living my life without you.
Despite what you say and how you feel, the blame
For our present can solely rest on my shoulders.
I have always had the opportunity to be there and do right by you.

But pride is a bitch, and occasionally
I would find ways to lessen our happier times.
Eventually our relationship fell apart,
Though I'm unsure how our bond severed.
I just wanted to love you the way I wanted to.

The most extreme interference came from myself.
I couldn't get around myself and allow acceptance of your love.
I apologize for this and for the undependable touch from my hands.
It's hard, so hard dealing with the fact that I repeatedly let you down.
Especially when sometimes all you needed was a smile or simply

Three words that would have silenced your rampaged thoughts.
If we don't reconcile, indeed
I will feel this way forever.
Though my breaths have genuinely been hurtful,
You shattered me this time.

I travel in coach with an empty shotgun,
Void of your presence,
Full of every emotion that we ever shared.
So now, I carry a little pain along with me everywhere I go;
That way, I'm never alone.

A Time When Life Was Perfect

By Margaret Mahoney

Chapter 1

A warm summer breeze filled with love wrapped its arms around Joanna as she began to pack up her treasures and place them in the cardboard box. "At least I can take you with me," she said. The painted eyes of the worn doll seemed to look at Joanna with love and understanding. Joanna knew that, at fifteen, she was too old for dolls, but this doll was special. It was the one thing that had remained constant in her life.

Joanna hugged the doll very tightly as she remembered the day that had changed her and her family's life forever. Joanna had been four years old; she was swinging from a tire swing that hung from a weeping willow tree. This tree was so big and so tall that it seemed to stretch outward to the heavens. She remembered her father walking up the driveway, his tie hanging loosely around his neck, and his blue vested sweater lingering on his shoulder.

Joanna had sprung from the swing and run to jump into her father's arms. "Daddy...you're home," Joanna remembered yelling. Her father's usual response was to pick up his fair-skinned, brown-haired, bright-eyed daughter and fly her into the house with him. But this time her father had acted differently. He hadn't picked her up or said, "Hi, Pumpkin." All he had done was brush her aside saying, "Joanna, not now. Daddy's tired."

At the age of four, Joanna could not understand why her father had acted this way, but now at age fifteen, she could. Her father had come home to tell her mother that he had lost his job. The day after, Joanna remembered seeing her mother sitting on her bed with tears in her eyes. Joanna had walked over to her and said, "Don't cry, Mommy," as she crawled up on the bed to give her mother a hug. Her mother had been clutching a letter so tightly in her hands that it was as though she were trying to squeeze the words off the paper.

The words on the paper Joanna could not read back then. But she knew from the way her mother was holding it that it wasn't good news.

"I'll go get Daddy, Mommy. He'll know what to do," had been

her reply as she had comforted her mother.

In a lifeless voice her mother had replied, "No, sweetheart, Daddy's not here. He has gone away for a little while."

Trembling over the memory, Joanna placed her doll lovingly in the cardboard box with the rest of her treasures. With tears starting to creep down her face, she looked around her room, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Then she spotted it, a treasure much more precious than the doll her father had given her. It was standing there on her night table; it was the last thing her eyes saw before she went to bed at night and the first thing she saw in the morning.

How could I forget this, she asked herself. A sigh escaped from Joanna as she picked up the only complete family picture she had. She couldn't believe it had been almost twelve years since that picture was taken. As she looked at the picture, she saw her mother, father and two brothers smiling back at her. In the picture, Joanna was sitting on her father's lap. Of course, it wasn't the perfect family picture. Her two blue-eyed brothers had red eyes, her mother's eyes were closed, her father's hair was a mess and Joanna was looking away from the camera. But to her, the picture was perfect. It was the last one that had been taken of them as a happy and complete family.

Joanna continued to look at the picture thinking that maybe, if she stared at it hard enough, everything would go back to being the way it was before her father had left, before he had lost his job and before the stress had become too much for him. She wished she could tell her father that he wasn't a failure. She knew these were the fears her father had been harboring because that is what it said in the letter, at least in the part of the letter that Joanna had been able to read. Her mother had snatched the letter away from her before she was able to finish it. After that, she never saw the letter again. She had gone looking for it but had come up empty handed. Before her mother had snatched the letter away from her, she remembered reading that her father had promised to be back someday.

Only time would tell if he would keep his promise or not. To this day it still bothered her that her mother had never let her finish reading the letter. After all, she had a right to know why her father had left. Didn't she? She had so many questions, but no one would give her the answers, she thought, as she placed the picture tenderly into the box

beside the doll. *Oh, well. Better finish packing,* she concluded. In a couple of days we move again. Joanna wondered what life in Massachusetts would be like. She loved her grandparents' farmhouse in Harmony, New Hampshire. She didn't want to leave. It was all she knew. She had lived there ever since her father had lost his job and her parents decided to move in with her grandparents to save money. But at least she had one strand of hope to hold onto—her father might come back someday. What if he did want to come back to them? Would he know where to find them? There was nothing she could do about that now; her mother had been offered a new teaching job and the whole family was moving to the city. She moved away from her bed, where the memories of her young life were being safely packed away, and went over to the window. She moved the curtain slightly and looked at the weeping willow tree that had been the source of so much joy and sorrow.

"Well, I still have two more days to enjoy, and who knows? Maybe, just maybe, he'll come back," she whispered. She let the curtain fall gently back on the windowpane and went back to finishing her packing.

"Joannnnna, Chrisssssss, Michaelllll, breakfast is ready." Joanna could hear her grandmother calling them. For some reason, Joanna's grandmother always called her grandchildren down to breakfast from youngest to oldest.

Joanna could smell the buttery pancakes; she could hear the bacon sizzling in the pan and smell the fresh eggs frying. She paused on the stairs so that she could hold onto these smells as a memory. She knew there would be no smells as fresh as these when they moved to the city.

Chris and Michael ran past her on the stairs. "Come on, slow poke. Let me give you a lift," Michael said, as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

"Michael, put me down!" Joanna said laughing as she gave her brother a playful whack on the behind.

"Nope, I can't. I've planned to spend the next two days making your and Chris' lives miserable since I'm not going to be seeing you two monkeys every day anymore." Twenty-three-year-old Michael looked at his sister playfully but also with a hint of sadness. Michael put Joanna down, so she could see him.

Joanna gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean you won't be seeing us that much anymore?"

Michael looked at his sister with his hands in his pockets. "I'm not moving to the city with you or Mom and Chris. I'm going to stay at the farm and help out Gram and Grandpa."

Joanna stood in silence for a couple of moments. Leaning on the banister for support, she let her thoughts run through her head. Michael couldn't just let them go out into the city by themselves. He had told Joanna the day her father left that he would never leave her. She had believed that Michael, unlike her father, would keep his promise.

With a look of shock and fear on her face, Joanna cried, "Michael, you promised me you would never leave us...after Daddy left, you promised!" Tears were flooding down Joanna's face just as they had when she found out her father was never coming back.

"Joanna, calm down," she could hear Michael say.

But she did not want to calm down. Michael had no right to do what he was doing.

"Besides," she could hear Michael continuing on. "You guys are all leaving me. I'm not leaving you," he said teasingly, hoping to get her to laugh or smile. Joanna didn't know how Michael could tease her at a time like this. Anger filled her eyes as she looked at him. "I hate you. I don't care if I ever see you again!" Joanna felt as if her head was about to explode.

Michael put his hand on her shoulder. "Joanna you don't mean that. You're just upset—you...."

Joanna interrupted him. "Don't touch me!"

Michael, looking hurt, slowly moved his hand away from her shoulder.

"Joey—you know you didn't mean it. You don't hate me. You're just getting your feelings confused. You're thinking of Dad, not me. You're mad at Dad for running out on us," Michael stammered.

"I did mean it, every word," Joanna replied between sobs.

Unfortunately for Michael, when he got nervous, he had a tendency to smile and let out a little snicker.

Joanna saw the smile on her brother's face, and that was the last straw. "It's not funny," she said, as she slapped him across the face.



Ben Steinberg

Michael grabbed the side of his face in pain. It wasn't the physical pain that hurt as much as the emotional pain. He couldn't believe that Joanna would ever get so angry with him that she would hit him.

Joanna was just as shocked by what had happened. She raced out of the house with the door slamming once, and then again, behind her. She could hear her grandmother's voice saying, "How many times have I told you kids not to slam the door?" She could hear her brother screaming, "Joeeyyyyyyy, come back." All she wanted to do was get away, so she kept on running. Joanna knew that she wanted to be alone, so she could think. She didn't want to move to the city, and she definitely didn't want to go there without Michael. She just wanted to keep on running. She wanted to run until she could be that little girl again. She wanted to run until she got back to the time when life was perfect.

Chapter 2

Her heart was pounding and her hands were shaking as she put them into the cool water of the lake and splashed some water onto her warm tear-stained face. Joanna breathed long hard shallow breaths to try to calm herself down. She loved to look into the lake when something was bothering her. Its ripples seemed to carry her problems away and push them far off into the horizon. Coming to the pond had always comforted her; she had started coming there the day that her father had walked out on them.

Joanna noticed another reflection in the water besides her own. She looked up to see her brother, Chris, standing behind her with a concerned look on his face. How did he know she was here? She wanted to be left alone. Why couldn't he understand that? She needed to straighten out her emotions. Right now, they were all jumbled together. She didn't feel like talking to anyone, not while she was this confused. Not even to her brother who gazed at her with worry in his eyes.

"Are you ok, Kid?" Even though Chris was only three years older than she, he still insisted on calling her kid.

"I want to be left alone. Please go away, Chris," Joanna pleaded.

"Not until you convince me that you're ok, and so far, I'm not convinced. Now, are you ok?" her brother asked her again and again until

she finally gave in.

"Better," she mumbled. Joanna started to do some questioning of her own. "How did you know where I was? How did you know what happened between Mike and me?"

"Joanna you're my sister. Of course I know where all your favorite hideouts are, and you weren't exactly whispering when you were yelling at Mike. I was in the kitchen the whole time you and Mike were arguing. You were probably just too upset to notice me." Joanna remained silent and Chris continued on.

"Joanna, just because Mike isn't moving to Boston with us doesn't mean that he's leaving like Dad did. You understand why Mike isn't coming with us, don't you?" Chris sat down next to Joanna.

"Yeah, because he loves Grammy and Grandpa more than us," Joanna said as she stared out over the lake.

Shaking his head, Chris replied, "You know that isn't true. Mike just knows that they're getting older and can't take care of the farm the way they used to. Besides, Mike couldn't survive in the city. He likes wide-open space; he would suffocate there."

Joanna turned her head sharply towards Chris. "Well, what about me and you and Mom? Why is everything always what he wants? It's not fair! Boston is about a hundred, million, zillion miles away from New Hampshire."

Chris chuckled at his sister's response. "A hundred, million, zillion miles away, huh? I don't think Boston is quite that far away. A couple of hours, yes, but two or three hours won't keep Mike away. Believe me."

Joanna figured that Chris was right. Mike would probably come and visit them, but it still wouldn't be the same. At least Chris would still be there. Even though he was starting college in the fall, he was going to be commuting to a small college right outside of Boston. Their mother didn't have enough money to let him board.

"Is it safe for me to be here?" came a slightly hurt voice from behind them. Joanna didn't have to look up. She knew it was Michael. She knew also that all of her fear and anger was directed more towards their father than to Michael. Joanna wasn't really mad at him anymore, anyway. She knew that she had to forgive him before they left. Her mother wouldn't let them leave New Hampshire before she had. The

motto of this family was, "Never let the sun set upon your anger." A nice thought floated into Joanna's mind. If I don't apologize to Michael, then Mom won't make us move to Boston.

"Well—are you ever going to forgive me, Sis?" Michael moved closer to Joanna.

"Nope, I 'm not," Joanna replied with a little smirk on her face.

"What's the smirk for?" Michael felt it was safe now to let out a little laugh.

"I felt like smirking. Do you have a problem with that?"

Joanna gave him a wide-eyed look.

"No, problem here," Michael replied, rubbing the side of his face that Joanna had slapped earlier.

"Oh, Michael, I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to slap you. You just took me by surprise, and you made me so angry," Joanna said apologetically.

Michael threw a rock into the water. "I know I should have told you sooner, but I had a feeling you would react badly. So I thought if I kept putting it off until a couple of days before you guys moved, then you'd have to forgive me sooner. You know Mom wouldn't let you go until you did."

Chris smiled in his sister's direction. "Joanna, Joanna, Joanna, you little sneak. You wouldn't say you're sorry to Mike because you thought that we wouldn't have to leave until you did. You should've known it wasn't going to work. Mom has to be in Boston by Monday to set up her classroom."

"Is this true, Joey? Is this why it took you so long to apologize?" Mike asked her.

"Wellllllll, yeah, and the fact that I am going to miss you like crazy," Joanna answered with a depressed look in her eyes.

"My dear Joanna, I am going to miss you too, but you'll be busy making new friends and exploring things in the city that you've never seen before. Besides, I 'll be driving down there so often, you'll never miss me," Michael reassured his sister.

"You promise?" Joanna looked at him from the corner of her eye.

"I promise. Cross my heart and hope to...." Michael was going

to say 'die,' but Joanna put her hand over his mouth to stop him. She hated it when her brothers said that.

"Don't say it. I believe you," Joanna replied nervously.

"Then, we're friends again?" Michael asked happily.

"Of course, we are," Joanna replied.

"Good," he said, although Joanna could still hear the hurt in Michael's voice.

"You know, there's a way you could make this up to me."

Michael had a devilish look in his eyes.

"How?" Joanna had a feeling she wasn't going to like his response.

"Well," Michael said, as he stood up, "we haven't spent too much time together lately because you and Chris have been busy packing." Michael shrugged his shoulders. "So, you know, I just figured we could spend this hot August day swimming in the pond."

Joanna sighed in relief. She had been afraid Mike was going to do something horrible to her, like tar and feather her. "I'll go get my bathing suit, then." Joanna started to walk in the direction of the house. However, before she could get two steps towards it, Michael and Chris grabbed her and threw her into the lake. When she hit the water, it felt cool and refreshing. Michael, Chris, and Joanna spent that day at the lake, splashing and teasing each other until they saw the sun set beneath the hills.

Chapter 3

The last couple of days went by quickly for Joanna and her family. She couldn't believe she was saying goodbye to her grandparents and Michael. She had already said goodbye a few days before to her friends at their favorite summer hangout, "Charlie's Ice Cream Shop."

As she hugged Michael goodbye, a tear started to form in her eye. "Bye, Mike," she said, forcing a smile. She didn't know what she would do without him. Joanna guessed that she had always looked up to Michael as a father figure since he had always been there for her. Not that her mom and Chris weren't, but it was different with Michael. Maybe it was because he was eight years older than she. She didn't know.

"You'll be fine," Michael said, as he opened the car door for

her. "Chris will look out for you and Mom. Don't worry, and if he doesn't, he'll have to answer to me," Mike said, smiling at his brother.

"Aye, Aye, Captain," Chris replied as he saluted his brother.

Joanna got into the car, and as her mother drove off, she took a mental picture of her grandparents and brother's faces waving goodbye. She took one last look at the old white house with the front porch that she had spent many a summer, fall, and spring day sitting on. As they drove through the town of Harmony, she looked at the ice-cream shop, which she was sure her friends would be going to this afternoon. After they drove through the small town, Joanna rested herself on the back of the seat. Her eyes started to close and she fell asleep to the soft murmur of her mother and brother counting how many different state license plates they could see on the road.

When Joanna woke up, the most disgusting smell was drifting past her nose. In front of them was a huge tractor-trailer truck with the exhaust blowing into their windows. *Welcome to the city*, Joanna thought to herself. "Are we in Boston?" she asked in a funny voice because she was holding her nose.

"Yes, we are, Sweetheart. There's the school where I'm going to teach." Joanna's mother pointed to a big ugly brick building with graffiti written all over the front doors. Joanna noticed that many of the buildings were like that.

Chris took a deep breath. "Breathe in that refreshing air," he said to Joanna sarcastically.

Joanna wondered if her lungs were going to turn black from breathing in that refreshing air Chris was talking about. The city was so different from the country. Big buildings were everywhere, and there were more cars than there were buildings. Joanna had seen movies that took place in cities, but she hadn't realized how different they were until now.

"Mom, why are we stopping?" Joanna asked.

"Because I need to stretch my legs, and it wouldn't hurt for you kids to do the same. Besides we are in downtown Boston, and it would be interesting to take in some of the sights. Over there is Boston Garden. It is one of most beautiful sights the city has to offer," Joanna's mother said as she was getting out of the car.

"So, Mom, you are going to give us the grand tour of the

famous Boston *Gahden*?" Chris asked, trying to do his best impression of a Boston accent.

Laughing at her brother, Joanna said, "Well, let's go take in the sights of our new home."

With their mother leading the way, Joanna and Chris saw the gardens along with many other famous sites—the common, the famous duck statues from the book, *Make Way for Ducklings* and the State House of Massachusetts. After filling their stomachs with big juicy cheeseburgers from *Joe's American Bar and Grill*, it was time for the Marshall family to locate their new house in South Boston.

Joanna had to admit, as she was getting back into the car, that she did wonder what her new house would look like and what kind of neighbors they would have. Back home in New Hampshire out in the country, the houses were far apart, but here in Boston, the houses were a lot closer together. Joanna thought it would definitely take some getting used to. As the car drove by, the landscape of the city started to change. Instead of seeing building after building and house after house, she started to see stretches of beaches. Joanna couldn't believe that there were beaches right in the middle of the city.

"Mom, there are beaches in Boston?" Joanna asked curiously, with excitement in her voice, because she loved the water and was happy that she would still be close to it.

"Yes, Joanna, in South Boston there are beaches. That's the Boston Harbor you are looking at. Or maybe I should say *Hahbar*," her mother said with a laugh. Her mother drove down one street and then another until, finally once again, the car came to a stop.

"Here we are. Here's our new home. At least for awhile until I can afford a bigger place," Joanna's mother said, hoping her children wouldn't complain about the small living quarters that they were going to be living in.

Joanna got out of the car and looked around her. She admitted to herself that the old apartment building with its blue paint peeling off wasn't the best. But it would do.

They each grabbed a suitcase and walked up the stairs of the apartment house. As Joanna looked around outside, she saw cars whizzing by and heard sirens blaring. The city was definitely noisier than the country, she thought to herself.

When Joanna opened the door to the apartment, she saw a small quaint living room with blue walls, a creamy white carpet, and sunlight gleaming from the white bay windows onto the tables, chairs, and couches that had been arranged by her mother a few days before. Joanna was glad to have some of the furniture around her that reminded her of her old country home in New Hampshire. As she sat in the big comfy blue chair, she could almost imagine her brother and grandparents being in the room with her and how they laughed at the stories that were told by the fireplace.

"Joanna!" At the sound of her mother's voice, Joanna's day-dream vanished, and she realized she was just surrounded by furniture. The family members she was dreaming about were still back in New Hampshire. She slowly got up from the chair to see what her mother wanted.

"Joanna," her mother said again, "I think you should start to unpack your things because it's getting late, and you have a busy day tomorrow." Her mother led her to the room that was to be Joanna's new bedroom. When she walked in, she saw a pile of boxes waiting to be unpacked, which went from the floor to the ceiling. Kidding, Joanna said, "I'm going to need a ladder to begin unpacking this mess."

The first box that Joanna opened contained her doll and the picture of her family. She placed the doll lovingly on her bed and hugged the picture tight against her. *I'll never be able to call this place home*, Joanna thought as she looked around the unfamiliar room. "It's too big and noisy," Joanna said to her doll. Joanna lay down on her bed, all of the sudden feeling very tired. "I can unpack later," she said drowsily. The next thing she knew she was fast asleep.

Chapter 4

The sunlight slowly peeped into her room and Joanna could feel a crisp, raw breeze tapping her on the shoulder telling her that it was time to wake up.

Joanna gladly woke up from her slumber of dreaming. She had dreamt that she was back on the farm riding her favorite horse, Shadow, who was galloping at a frightening speed, helping Joanna run from something, or maybe it was someone. In her dream Joanna remembered hearing a man calling her. Could it have been her father,

she wondered, or was she just re-enacting the fight she had had with Michael the other day? She thought about the dream as she was getting dressed trying to figure out why she would dream that. Exactly what was she running away from? She figured it was probably just because of the move and because she had been remembering the day her father left them. Joanna wanted no more memories of that day. Not today, anyway. Today was her sixteenth birthday, and she wanted everything to be perfect. Joanna was a little sad that she would be spending such an important day without her friends or Michael. But they had held a big party for her a couple of weeks before she left, which made up for it.

Chris had told Joanna that he had something special planned for her today. Joanna couldn't wait to see what it was. When Joanna reached the stairs of the little apartment a familiar fragrance wrapped itself around her nose. She smelled bacon and eggs. Of course, it wasn't the same homey smell of the breakfast that she was sure her grandmother was cooking up at home. Still, it warmed her heart that her brother knew what would make her so happy.

"Hey you," Joanna said as she reached the entrance of the kitchen.

"Hey kid," Chris said as he straightened out his chef's cap. "I thought you might like a little home cookin'."

"I love it, Chris. Thank you," Joanna said, as she sat down at the table to eat the breakfast that he set before her.

"So, birthday girl, what would you like to do today? The whole day is yours," Chris smiled. He knew exactly what his sister wanted to do today, but he just wanted to hear it from her.

"Chris, we have an appointment today, remember?" Joanna pleaded.

Chris wrinkled his forehead, pretending not to know what Joanna was talking about. "An appointment for what? I thought we were just going to party the whole day."

"No, Chris, we already did that. You are going to take me today to get my license. Mom made the appointment before we left New Hampshire. After that, you told me that you had a surprise to give me."

"Oh yeah, I remember now," Chris said, rolling his eyes. "We

better get a move on, or we'll be late, and trust me, you don't want that."

Chris and Joanna hopped into the car and with help from a policeman found their way to the registry.

Joanna waited nervously inside the waiting room as she waited for her number to appear on the flashing screen. Chris kept giving her advice on what to do if different situations arose.

She could hear him say, "Remember, now, at the end of the test, make sure you put your emergency brake on. Joanna, are you listening?"

Joanna replied with, "Yup. Uhuh...emergency brake." But her focus was on the red sign that the numbers kept appearing on. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off it. The numbers just kept flashing up there—24, 25...80,81..100; with each number that passed, a nervous soul would adhere to its beckoning call and disappear behind the white wall never to be seen again. Joanna started to fidget in her seat as she realized that her number would soon be next. She tried to remember everything that her brothers and mother had taught her, but for some reason, all she could remember was, 'Always use your directional light when making a turn.'

"Come on, Joanna," she heard Chris say.

She looked up, and Chris was already headed behind the white wall. Then she looked up at the sign with the numbers on it. Sure enough, her number was flashing for everyone to see. "Coming," she replied shakily to Chris. Joanna got up from her seat and made her way behind the white wall of judgment. Behind this wall, it would be decided whether she was to be a pedestrian for the rest of her life or be the queen of the road.

Joanna walked up to Chris' car where the driving instructor was already sitting in the passenger's seat. Joanna took a deep breath and glanced over in Chris' direction. He winked at her and then jumped into the backseat. Joanna grabbed the handle of the front door, opened it, and sat herself down behind the wheel.

"Hi, how are you?" Joanna asked the instructor enthusiastically.

"Never mind the how do you do's. Just drive," he said in a gruff voice.

So much for being friendly, Joanna thought as she shifted the

car out of park and into drive. The driving test was going so smoothly for Joanna that she couldn't believe it. For every turn she made, she remembered the directional. When she stopped at red lights, she didn't go over the crosswalk. So far, there wasn't one single mishap, not one. Joanna couldn't believe her luck. The driving instructor even started to become friendlier. He was telling Chris and Joanna about all of the fun things that there were to do in Boston. The butterflies in Joanna's stomach were gradually starting to fly away; she was starting to relax and actually enjoy her driving test. Then, it was time to parallel park; she could feel her hands growing more and more sweaty by the minute. But she knew that if she really tried, she could do it. Both the instructor and her brother were coaching her on. Joanna put the car in reverse and backed the back end of the car into the spot. Only one more end to go, Joanna thought, as she tried to steer the front end of the car into place. But the car would not go forward. It just kept on going backwards. She could not figure out what was wrong. In the mirror, she saw Chris motioning to something, but she couldn't figure out what it was. The driving instructor looked speechless as he saw how close they were getting to the big truck in back of them. Joanna tried braking and stopping, hoping that it would solve the problem, but it only made things worse. The instructor spilt coffee all over himself and burnt his lap. He yelled in agony, muttering words under his breath that Joanna could not make out. If Joanna didn't figure out the problem soon, they would be in much more trouble because the truck was a lot closer in the rearview mirror.

Finally, Chris yelled out, "Joanna you're still in reverse!"

Joanna looked down, and sure enough, the car was still in the reverse gear. Relieved that her brother had finally told her and feeling embarrassed by the mistake, Joanna shifted the gear back into drive and safely directed the front of the car into the parking space. Joanna was certain that after this fiasco, she was bound to remain a pedestrian for the rest of her life. But to her surprise, the instructor smiled and said that if she promised to faithfully work on her parallel parking, he would give Joanna her license because everything else was flawless, and she was the best he had seen all day. Joanna could not thank him enough.

Chris let Joanna drive home, making her practice parallel park-

ing a few times along the way. When they got home, there was a bright blue Mustang convertible sitting in the front of their house. "Wow, that's my kind of car," Joanna exclaimed.

"I know it is, and here are the keys," Chris said smiling as he handed them to her.

"What do you mean, the keys? If you're joking, Chris, it isn't funny."

"Who said I was joking? It's your birthday and dreams come true on birthdays, right? So go ahead, let's try out this new car of yours." Chris got out of the car and headed towards the Mustang, waiting for Joanna to follow.

"I just can't believe it. I mean, how could you afford it?" Joanna asked, as she followed Chris out of his car and got into hers.

"A friend of mine wanted to get rid of it. It was in pretty bad condition, so I got it at a cheap price and fixed her up for you." Chris was getting more excited by the minute. He couldn't wait for Joanna to drive it.

Joanna put the keys in the ignition, and off they went for a drive around the block. Joanna couldn't help but think about what Chris had said, "Today's your birthday, a day when dreams come true." She wondered if all of her dreams would come true today. The one dream that she was constantly hoping for was to hear from her father. Well, I still have time, she thought to herself. There are still the birthday candles to blow out to see if all of my wishes come true.

Chapter 5

Joanna lay on her bed with the door closed. She was still grasping the card in her hands when she heard the light sound of footsteps on the stairs. She knew the footsteps didn't belong to Chris because she could still hear him snoring. All of the noise in the world couldn't muffle Chris's snoring. She knew that the footsteps belonged to her mother. But she didn't know what to do. She had been surprised, herself, to find a letter in the mailbox addressed to her. She didn't think anyone had her address yet. How could he have found it, she wondered? But there it was, a card from her father. There was no return address on it. There was not even a postmark. The envelope simply said, "Joanna." After all these

years, why now, she wondered? He didn't even write anything special in the card. All it said was, "Happy birthday to a wonderful daughter. Love, Dad." How does he know if I'm a 'wonderful daughter' or not? He doesn't even know me. Joanna could hear her mother's footsteps coming closer to her room. "Oh, what am I going to tell her?" she murmured to herself. "I wish Michael were here. He would know what to do."

Karen knocked on her daughter's bedroom door and waited for her to open it. After a few minutes when the door still remained shut, Karen knocked again. But there was still no answer. Beginning to get worried, Karen said, "Joanna, are you alright?"

"Um...Yeah Mom, just a sec," Karen heard her daughter say in a shaky voice.

Joanna took the card and threw it into her pillowcase. She figured that she shouldn't drop the bomb on her mother right away. It was best to wait a few minutes to at least see if her day had been a good one and whether she was up for the news. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

Karen walked into her daughter's room and saw that it looked just like her old room back in New Hampshire. Clothes were draped over chairs, books were covering the floor, and the bed sheets were in shambles.

"How was your day, Mom?" Joanna asked, trying to sound upbeat.

"It was alright, but I'm worried about you. Why did it take you so long to answer the door, and why do you sound so nervous?" Karen asked as she moved some clothes over so she could sit down on the bed.

"Oh, I was just unpacking and straightening up a little," Joanna said, as she began to fold the clothes her mother had just moved.

"I see. Well, I would hate to see what your room looks like when it's messy," Karen said sarcastically.

Joanna let out a little nervous laugh. She picked up her pillow where her father's card lay safely hidden away from her mother's view.

"So, how was your day, Honey?" Karen sensed that Joanna's uneasiness might be because she failed the driving test. "Honey, it's ok

if you didn't pass. I mean, I didn't pass my first time. Don't worry, you'll get your license eventually."

"Everything went fine, Mom. I passed the test with flying colors, or maybe I should say *coffee*." Joanna smiled and went on to explain how the coffee had spilt onto the instructor's lap.

"Congratulations! I'm glad that everything went ok. But something is bothering you. What's wrong? The brightness that had been in Karen's eyes was diminishing as her concern for her daughter grew.

"Nothing's wrong. Why would you think something is wrong?" Joanna rambled.

"Well, for one thing, you're holding that pillow like it contains the most valuable treasure in the world," Joanna's mother replied.

To Joanna, even though the card didn't say much, it was precious. It meant that he must care a little bit about her, and that made her feel warm inside with an intense mixture of anger and sense of abandonment. She wondered how she would bring about the subject with her mother. She knew from the look on her mother's face that she wasn't hiding her emotions very well. But how could she tell her mother that her father had sent a card and that she was glad he had. She didn't want to hurt her mother's feelings, but she couldn't help but feel a little bit of joy over the card. There were so many questions she wanted to ask her father if she ever had the chance to see him again. But she wouldn't want to hurt her mother, and she knew that it would.

"How do I tell you this?" Joanna said softly.

"How do you tell me what?" she heard her mother reply. Joanna didn't realize that she had spoken so her mother could hear.

"Nothing. Just forget about it," Joanna said, moving from the bed with the pillow still in her hands.

"No, I won't forget it. What is it that you need to tell me? Don't you know that you can tell me anything?" Karen said, looking at her daughter for answers.

"I—just don't know," Joanna stammered.

"Does this have something to do with your father?" Karen asked.

Joanna took a deep breath and said, "Yes, Mom, it does." Joanna put her hand in the pillowcase where she could feel the card that her father had sent her tucked safely away. "Mom, um, Dad, well,

you see, he."

"He what Joanna? Just say it!" Karen replied anxiously.

"He sent me a card," Joanna blurted out and then took the card from its hiding place and placed it on the bed beside her mother.

Silence followed for several minutes as Karen picked up the card and read it. Joanna didn't dare speak. She had no idea what to say as she saw the sadness growing in her mother's eyes.

"How did he know where we were?" Joanna heard her mother mumble. "I thought I told him once he left to never..." Karen suddenly remembered that Joanna was still present. "Well, how do you feel about the card, Joanna?"

"Mom, what did you mean when you started to say, 'I thought, once he left, I told him never ...' and then you stopped. What did you mean by that?" Joanna asked in a demanding voice.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything by that, Joanna. Just forget about it." Karen's voice quivered slightly.

"No, you meant something by that last statement," Joanna insisted.

"It's none of your concern, Joanna! Now stop it!" Joanna had never before heard her mother talking to her like that. Joanna figured she had stumbled onto something big, and she wasn't about to give up until she got an answer.

"Were you part of the reason why Dad left?" Joanna asked angrily.

"Joanna, please," Karen pleaded. "You wouldn't understand."

"Why wouldn't I? You did have something to do with Dad leaving. Why won't you just admit it?" Joanna shouted.

"I am your mother; you have no right to yell at me," Karen answered shakily.

"I have every right to yell at you if you sent my father packing," Joanna screamed.

Karen just looked at her daughter, stunned. She didn't like the hateful tone that Joanna had in her voice.

"What's all the yelling about?" Chris asked, as he sauntered into the room.

"Mom is the reason why Dad left," Joanna replied filling him in.

"Joanna that's not true. Mom isn't the reason why Dad left," Chris said in a gruff voice because he was still waking up from his sleep.

"Isn't that right, Mom?" he asked, looking at his mother.

Karen wasn't sure how to answer her son or her daughter. Karen wasn't the whole reason why their father had left them, but she probably did share some of the blame. In order for Karen to truthfully answer her children, she would have to tell them the whole truth, and she knew she was not ready to do that, yet. Why did he have to send Joanna that card? Why now? Not to mention how he had known where to send it, and the fact that it didn't have any address on it did bother her. She wondered if he was having someone follow them. Then she figured he must be because how else would he know that they had moved and where they had moved to? After all those years, Karen's fears had finally caught up to her. She feared that Peter might try to get in contact with their children in some way. But she had always thought she would have time to tell them everything. She thought that time would always be on her side, but now it had abandoned her. She could tell from the look in Joanna's eyes that she was growing in impatience waiting for an answer. Karen wished she could think of one to give. Finally, she settled on a response. "Chris, you're right. I'm not all of the reason why your father left, but I suppose I'm partly to blame because I should have sensed sooner his feelings of depression."

"Mom, you can't blame Dad's depression on yourself. I mean, you had three young kids to take care of. It wasn't your fault." Chris put his arm around his mother.

"Well, I believe that you're hiding something. Otherwise, why wouldn't you let me read the rest of the letter?" Joanna asked.

"I have my reasons, Joanna. Just let's leave it at that, for now." Karen was growing tired, and she didn't have the energy to argue with her teenage daughter right now.

"Well, I just want you to know something," Joanna said pointing a finger at her mother. "I'm going to find out the truth, and I'm going to try and find him. I have a right to know who he is and why he left. Mom, you can't do anything to stop me." With that, Joanna told her mother and brother that she wanted to be alone.

Chris began to protest, but Karen told him that, maybe, it would be better if they did leave. Karen needed time to think, too. She needed to think about how she was going to stop Joanna from finding out the truth about her father.

Chapter 6

Karen fumbled around her desk drawers looking in every corner trying to find where she had put it. She knew it was somewhere; she had placed it there in haste after she found Joanna reading it. "Oh, where is it?" she cried, as she was throwing paper after paper onto the floor. Opening drawer after drawer, she continued to search until she finally saw it. It was torn a little in the corner, and it had wrinkled and faded into a golden brown. She took the letter in her hands and placed it on her bed to smooth it out. As Karen reread the letter, every emotion that she had felt reading it for the first time came rushing back to her. The fear, anger, disappointment and loneliness settled, once again, in the pit of her stomach. Karen also remembered, as if it were yesterday, the fight they had had the night before he left.

She was cleaning up the kitchen after dinner. She had decided to let the children go outside and play afterwards since it was summer and the days were so much longer. Karen was looking out the window, watching Joanna swinging on a swing, when she saw Peter's car pull into the driveway. She smiled as she saw Joanna, pigtails flying, run up to greet her father, and she grew annoyed when he didn't accept her warm greeting. Karen turned away from the window and went to the stove where she had Peter's dinner warming in the oven. She took it out and placed it on the table just as her husband walked in. There was not the sweep-her-off-her-feet greeting that he used to give. No, that hadn't happened for many years, and Karen felt it was probably good that it hadn't because she probably would have fainted dead away.

"Where were you for dinner?" Karen asked him sternly.

"I was out," was his only reply.

Disgusted with his response, Karen said, "I thought we agreed that we would all have dinner as a family. We hardly ever see you anymore. It's like you don't even live here."

"Someone has to make a living for this family. I was out finding work," Peter answered in a gruff voice.

"Oh, so I suppose teaching isn't a living?" Karen inquired with her arms folded across her chest.

Peter just looked at her blankly. "Well, yeah, I guess it is, but it

sure doesn't pay all of the bills."

Karen stared angrily back at him. "Well it might not pay all of the bills, but at least it pays some them, and at least I have a job. I also thought we agreed that you were going to go to your son, Michael's, basketball game, and I would go to Chris's baseball game. What happened to that agreement?"

"Karen, I was busy and I forgot. It's been a hard day. Please just leave me alone and let me eat. I can't deal with this right now," Peter answered her, hoping she would stop.

"That's exactly the problem, Peter; you can never deal with anything. For you, there is always tomorrow. We can always deal with everything tomorrow. Well, I'm telling you there's not a tomorrow, and we have to start dealing with things today. I need you to help me out, here. I work, clean, pay the bills, and take care of the children. All you do is sit around and sulk all day. If you could just help out a little? Maybe if you could stay home and take care of things until you find a job and get back on your feet? If you would stay home to take care of the kids, I could earn more money at the after school program.

"Karen looked at him pleadingly, hoping that he would accept her suggestion.

Peter's face turned red, and his cheeks puffed up as if they were going to explode any minute. His eyes were flashing like lightening, and when he finally spoke, his voice sounded like a crack of thunder. "There is no way in Hell that I will stay home and do the work of a woman! I may have lost my job, but I will not lose my dignity. What would my friends think?"

"But Peter," Karen begged, "we have to do something. Your friends won't think any less of you. A lot of women work now while the men stay home. Please, it's the only way.

"I said NO, and that will be the end of it!" Peter got up and stormed out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Karen demanded.

"It's none of your business where I'm going," Peter hollered back.

"You're probably going out to get drunk with your friends. Well go booze up; see if I care!" Karen shouted back, throwing up her hands in disgust.

Peter had just looked at her and slammed the door shut. Karen

hadn't heard from him again until later that night when he got home and they had argued again.

Karen didn't care to remember that second argument right now. For the time being, the first one was all she could handle. Sweat was pouring out of her as the bitter memories kept coming back. Karen decided it would be best if she took a shower, just to wash away the events of the day. As she walked into the bathroom, she could hear Joanna still sobbing over the argument they had had. Karen honestly didn't know what to do or what to say. She knew that no matter what she said, Joanna wouldn't listen to her. Not now, anyway, because Joanna knew that Karen wanted her to have nothing to do with her father. The only person Karen figured Joanna would talk to was Michael. She figured that she would give him a call and then take a shower to help her relax and put her mind at ease.

Chapter 7

Joanna opened her bedroom door to the loud noise of quiet. She heard the soft hum of the shower but nothing else. She figured her mother was taking a shower because this was what she usually did when she was upset. As for Chris, she had heard him leave the house a couple of hours ago. With her mother in the shower and Chris gone, she figured it was safe to make the phone call she knew she needed to make. Joanna walked down the stairs quietly, so her mother couldn't hear her. She picked up the phone that was on the hall table and took it outside with her. It was a nice warm Indian summer day; the birds were singing, and people were outside raking the leaves that had already begun to fall. Joanna sat down on the stairs and dialed her old home phone number. She waited impatiently as she heard ring after ring until finally she heard a soft warm voice on the other end.

"Hi, Grammy. It's Joanna." The sound of her grandmother's voice began to comfort her.

"Hi Honey. I miss you all so much. How are you doing in the big city?" Joanna's grandmother asked with happiness in her voice.

"The city is fine, Grammy. How is everything back home?" Joanna yearned to be back home. She missed everything—her old school and especially her friends.

"Everything is the same here. Except your grandpa's ulcer is acting up again. But it's his own fault because he eats all of that spicy food. I keep telling him not to, but he never listens to me." Joanna's grandmother let out a little sigh. "Well, tell me, now, how is school going, how does Chris like college, and your mom, how is her new job going?"

Joanna laughed at her grandmother's enthusiasm. "School is ok, and Chris loves school. He has joined all of these different clubs, and Mom seems like she likes her new job a lot."

"I'm glad everything is going well, Joanna honey. I'm sorry to have to cut this conversation so short, but I've got a pie cooking in the oven, and it is going to be burnt to a crisp if I don't get it out soon. Give all of my love to Chris and your Mother. I almost forgot, Joanna dear. Happy Birthday!"

Joanna interrupted her grandmother before she could hang up the phone. "Grammy, wait. Don't hang up yet. Is Michael there? I wanted to ask him something," Joanna asked anxiously.

"Michael? Yes, he's here. He's outside working in the fields. Hold on, Sweetie. Let me go get him."

Joanna heard her grandmother put the phone down on the table. While she was waiting for her grandmother to come back with Michael, she thought about how she would love to be sitting in the country kitchen, eating the mouth-watering apple pie that her grandmother was baking in the oven.

"Hey, Birthday Girl," Joanna heard Michael say. "How are you? I think you should know I just got off the phone with Mom. She's worried about you."

"That's funny, Mike. Gram didn't say anything about Mom calling." Joanna was slightly relieved that her mother had called because now she didn't have to be the one to tell Michael that their father had contacted them.

"That's because Gram wasn't here. She was at the doctor's," Michael said with his mouth full of apple pie.

"Is she all right?" Joanna's voice was full of concern for her grandmother.

"Yeah, she's fine. It was just a routine checkup."



John Mahoney

"Is Grammy there now? I wouldn't want her to hear any of this conversation. It might upset her too much." Joanna's grandmother had been terribly bothered by her son-in-law's abandonment of his family, and she had vowed to rake him over the coals if she ever laid eyes on him again.

"Nope, not within ear shot. She just went to give Grandpa a piece of pie, which I'm enjoying a piece of, myself." Michael knew Joanna would be jealous.

"Well, save me some, will yah? But on a more serious note, I suppose since you talked to Mom already, you know I got a card from Dad?"

"Yeah, I know. Mom didn't go into much detail, though. She was too upset. What did it say?" Michael asked curiously.

"It just said, 'Happy Birthday,' but what confuses me is how he knew where I was."

"That's because he came to visit me, and I told him," Michael said nervously, not knowing how Joanna would reply.

"He came to visit you, and you never told any of us?" Joanna was angry that Michael could keep something so important from her.

"I know, Mom was upset, too, and I should have told you sooner, but I wanted to check him out first. I thought he might change his mind about contacting you. I didn't want to get your hopes up." Michael hoped that Joanna understood why he had kept the visit a secret.

"Why would he change his mind?" Joanna asked curiously.

"Let's just say I didn't roll out the red carpet for him," Michael replied sarcastically.

"Did you know he was going to send the card, Michael?" Joanna pulled the card out of her pocket and held it tightly in her hands.

"Yes, Joanna, I did."

"Why didn't you tell me? If I had known, it wouldn't have been such a shock."

"I know, Joanna. But after I spoke to him, I thought it would be better if he contacted you in his own time and his own way. But maybe you're right. I probably should've told you first." Michael wondered what his sister was thinking and what she thought about the pos-

sibility of meeting their father.

"What is he like, Michael? How did he react to seeing you? Did he ask about me right away?" Joanna had a bunch of questions popping up in her head regarding her father.

"Joanna, slow down. I'll tell you everything in detail. Don't worry." Michael thought of how to recount the day that he had seen their father.

"Well," Michael began, "I was finishing cleaning out the horse's stalls, and I decided to take a break for lunch when...."

"Um, Michael you don't have to be that vivid. Just get to the point," Joanna begged.

"You said you wanted every detail. Just trying to please you. But ok, I'll skip to the main points," Michael teased.

"As I was walking back to the house, I saw a man on the porch swing. At first, I thought it was the guy who reads the gas meter. But then he called out my name, and I recognized the voice as being Dad's." Michael took a breath and then continued. "I couldn't believe it at first, and I didn't know what to do. I remember thinking that he came back just as he left, without any warning. I told him it wasn't fair that he expected me to treat him with open arms when he hasn't been in my life for the past twelve years."

"What did he say to that?" asked Joanna curiously.

"He said he wants to be a family again, and I should give him that chance because he is my father. You're not going to like this, Joanna, but I told him to get off of my property, and when I was his son, he hadn't given me a chance, so why should I do the same for him?" Michael paused a moment waiting for his sister's response.

"Michael you're angry. You have every right to voice you anger. What happened next?" Joanna was eager to know what her father had said about her.

"He just told me he had left because he had a drinking problem, he couldn't handle responsibility, and he didn't want to hurt us any more than he already had. Then, he asked about you and Chris, and Mom..."

Joanna interrupted him. "What did he say about us? What did you tell him?"

Michael laughed at Joanna's excitement. "I was just about to

tell you. I told him that you had moved, and you were all doing fine. He wanted to know if either you or Chris would want to meet him. I told him that Chris and I feel the same way about him, and that, honestly, we want nothing to do with him. But I said that you might be interested in meeting him." Michael stopped to catch his breath. "Before I gave him your address, I talked to him a bit more to see if he was sincere. Joanna, I think he really does feel bad for neglecting us all of these years. But that still doesn't give him the right to come back into our lives and think that everything will be ok. He has to know how angry and upset we are. Joanna, it scares me how much resentment I have for him, but I decided that you need to make up your own mind about meeting him. That's why I gave him your address." Michael hoped Joanna would understand his reservations.

Joanna's heart sank when she heard how much dislike he had for their father. Of course, she did understand his anger. She was angry, too, but he was still their father. How could they not keep in touch with him.

"I understand, Michael. It's just that I have to know about him. I have to see if he cares, even if it's only a little."

"I know you do. That's why I suggested he send you a birthday card, to let you know he's interested in meeting you."

"How do I get in touch with him?" asked Joanna.

"He gave me a phone number to give to you in case you called me asking questions about him. He wants to leave the decision about whether to meet him up to you. Do you want his number?" Michael wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing, but he figured that it had to happen somehow. He knew from his earlier conversation with their mother that she would not be happy, but the decision was up to Joanna, and she was the only one who could make it.

Joanna nervously replied, "Yes, Mike, give me the number. I need to know the truth about him."

"Ok, it sounds like you're ready for this, and you're right; all of us deserve to know the truth. Do you have a piece of paper and pen ready?"

"Yup, I do." Her hands were shaking as she held the pen.

"Ok, the number is 232-654-9876." Michael repeated the number a couple of times to make sure Joanna got it down right.

"I have it. Thank you, Michael. I think I'll give him a call today." Joanna's voice was starting to sound shaky at the thought of speaking to her father.

"Joanna, before you call, do yourself a favor. Take a couple of deep breaths and put your thoughts in order. Then call me to let me know how everything went." Michael knew his sister would be fine, and this was something she had to do. Eventually, all of them would have to face up to it, too.

"I will, and Michael, promise that you'll come visit us soon." Joanna really missed her brother, and it felt like months since she had seen him.

"I promise I'll come soon." With that, they said their goodbyes and hung up the phone.

Chapter 8

Joanna cradled the phone in her hands and took a couple of deep breaths before she dialed the phone number. She kept saying to herself that everything would be fine, but she also wondered if she should leave this can of worms that she was about to open closed. She wondered if she should put her family in that much pain again and reopen all of the wounds from the past. But she didn't know how she could move on with her future if she didn't take care of the problems of the past, especially a problem that would always be there until it was resolved. With that Joanna dialed the number that her brother had given her. Before she was ready, she heard a deep voice answer, "Hello?" Joanna panicked and didn't know what to do or say. The voice on the other end of the phone kept saying, "Hello, who is it?" like he was playing a broken record. Joanna quickly hung up the phone. Her hands were shaking. She tried to take deep breathes to help herself calm down, but it wasn't working. Joanna knew it would be easier for her if she had her mother's blessing and if she didn't feel like she was going behind her mother's back. She decided to go upstairs and tell her mother what she was doing.

Joanna walked into her mother's bedroom where she found her wrapped up in a pink bathrobe sitting on her bed.

"Mom, can we talk? I need to tell you something." Joanna sat down on the bed as her mother nervously fidgeted with the strings of

her bathrobe.

"I think that would be a good idea. I talked to your brother today. I'm hoping that he will come and talk with you about this whole mess."

"Mom, I just got off the phone with Mike, and he gave me Peter's phone number. I came up here to ask you for your blessing in calling him," Joanna said anxiously.

"Well, you don't have my blessing, and I forbid you to call him. It is absolutely out of the question," Karen said as she threw her hair towel down on the floor.

"Why don't you understand why I need to do this? I have to find out why, Mom, and I'm going to with or without you," Joanna replied angrily.

"Joanna, you don't know what you're getting into. Please don't do it. He left us. He wants nothing to do with us. Just accept it."

"Well, I can't and I'm calling him now." Joanna ran out of her mother's room in frustration. She yanked the phone angrily from its cradle, upset by her mother's ignorance. She pressed the redial button on the phone, so she wouldn't have time to lose her nerve. This time the phone was answered right away.

"Hello?" came the same deep voice.

"Hi.... um is this Peter, um Peter Marshall?" Joanna replied nervously.

"Yes, it is. Who is this?" Joanna's father replied causally.

"Um, this is Joanna—your daughter." She nervously entwined the telephone cord around her fingers as she awaited her father's reply. Silenced followed Joanna's introduction. She could hear her father breathing deeply on the phone. "Are you alright? If this is a bad time, I can call back. I'm sorry if I upset you. I just wanted to..."

"No, uh you didn't upset me. I'm just surprised, happily surprised. I didn't think you would call so soon," came the deep voice that Joanna hadn't heard since her youth. "It's really you. My baby girl. I can't believe it."

"Yeah, it's me. I'm not really a baby anymore, but of course, it has been a long time." Joanna wondered what he was really thinking, if he truly cared about her, and why he wanted to see her now.

"Joanna, I know it's been awhile. But I hope I can help you to

understand why I left." She could tell that his voice was full of concern and sadness for her feelings. But right now, Joanna felt so confused that she didn't know what to say to keep the conversation going.

"Well, yeah, I would like it if you could explain a few things. Um, maybe we could meet sometime because I feel awkward talking about this over the phone." Joanna was still nervous and her voice shook as she spoke.

"That would be terrific, Joanna. Just name the time and the place," was Peter's enthusiastic reply.

Joanna paused, trying to think of where and when they should meet. "Um...do you know about that little coffee shop at the corner of Liberty Street and Elm? Could we meet there?"

"Sounds perfect. I know exactly where that is. Are you doing anything on Friday? Could we meet around one or two?" Peter replied sounding as if this were something they did on a weekly basis.

"Friday is good for me. I have a meeting to attend at three thirty, so it might be cut kind of short." Joanna had started to grow nervous as the possibility of meeting her father became a reality.

"Ok, it's settled, then," Peter said excitedly. "I look forward to meeting you Joanna. I have to go now. I'll see you Friday at the coffee shop, right?"

"Yes, I'll see you then, um, Peter." But it was too late; he had already hung up. Joanna had forgotten to ask her father how she would recognize him and how he would recognize her. Oh well, she thought as she hung up the phone. At least I'll finally find out the answers I've been searching for so long.

Joanna had a restless sleep the night before she was to meet her father. She kept tossing and turning. The dream that she had had when she first moved to Boston kept coming back to her. Only this time she was a little girl, and Shadow was just a pony.

She was galloping around the yard and her father was holding onto the rein around Shadow's neck. Everything was perfect; the sky was a bright blue, the sun was smiling down on them brightly, and the birds were singing a beautiful melody.

"Daddy, promise you won't let go," Joanna remembered saying.

"I won't, Pumpkin. I promise I'll never let go," her father replied, smiling at her.

Shadow started galloping faster and faster around the yard. Joanna felt her father grip the rein even harder.

"Whoa boy, whoa, slow down!" she heard her father yell.

"Daddy, don't let go. Daddy, please don't let go!" little Joanna exclaimed in fright.

"I'm trying, but I can't hold on. I can't." Her father was slowly losing his grip on the rein. No matter what he did, he couldn't hold the horse steady. The sun started to disappear behind the clouds and the birds could no longer be heard singing. The only sound that could be heard was Joanna screaming for her daddy. Shadow kept on running faster and faster. Her father slowly started to lose his grip until, finally, he had no choice but to let go. Her father just stared after her in desperation as he saw the horse leap over fence and out of his reach.

Joanna, sobbing, yelled to her father, "Daddy, you promised you wouldn't let go. You promised you wouldn't leave me." Joanna woke up shaken over the dream, surrounded in darkness, and wondering if she really should go through with meeting her father. Since she couldn't sleep after that frightful dream, she decided to get up and drink some warm milk. Everyone knew it was supposed to help you sleep. She decided to see if it was true. When she walked down the stairs to the kitchen, she saw the light was already on. She wondered who else could possibly be awake. When she walked into the kitchen, she saw her mother there drinking a cup of tea.

Karen looked up and saw her daughter standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing up?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," Joanna answered as she was getting the milk out of the fridge.

"Well, I was just thinking about Peter," Karen answered as she sipped her tea.

"Me too. I'm nervous about meeting him tomorrow, but I know I would feel a lot better if I had your support in this." Joanna slid into the chair next to her mother.

"Joanna, the reason why I have my reservations is because I don't want you to get hurt. I want to protect you from the pain that you could have. It's my job to protect you, and that is all I want to do," Karen replied as she took another sip of her tea.

"Mom, you can't protect me from this. He is a part of me, and

for good or bad, I have to know about him."

"I know you do, and I know nothing I can say will stop you. Your brother made me realize that." Karen looked at her daughter and smiled slightly.

"You mean Michael?"

"No, not Michael. Chris. When you went out his afternoon, Chris had a little chat with me."

Joanna's eyes grew in excitement as her mother discussed her conversation with Chris. She thought that maybe Chris was coming around, and maybe he would go with her tomorrow.

Karen read the look of excitement in her daughter's eyes. "Don't get so excited, Joanna. Chris still hasn't changed his mind about meeting your father. He wants nothing to do with him. Chris just made me realize how important it was for you to meet him and how I was letting my emotions cloud my vision." Karen paused for a minute thinking about what to say next.

"Mom, I just wanna..."

Karen interrupted Joanna before she could finish. "Let me speak, Joanna, before I change my mind and don't give you my blessing." Karen looked at her daughter, still unsure if she was doing the right thing.

"Sure Mom, go ahead." Joanna gave her mother her full attention with no interruptions.

"Chris helped me to see that I have to let you know where you came from and why your father took the action he did. Even if it does cause you some pain, you need to know the truth. It is better for you if you have me behind you than if you have to worry about me being upset or hurt over your meeting him. Also, if your father has changed, I don't want you to be afraid to get to know him because of me. I will not have any of my children feeling torn between their parents. So, I guess what I'm telling you is that if you do go through with this tomorrow, you have my full blessing." Karen watched Joanna's face light up with relief as she realized that she had gotten the blessing she had been so desperately searching for.

Joanna knew how hard it must be for her mother to give her that blessing. She could read in her mother's face how worried she was and how much strength it must have taken. Joanna thanked her moth-

er the only way she knew—with one great big hug. “Thank you, Mom, you have no idea how much this means to me.”

“Joanna before you hug me too much, there is something I think that you should see before you meet your father tomorrow.” Karen pulled a familiar tattered, worn out, aging yellow piece of paper from her pocket.

Joanna knew right away what it was, the letter that her father had written to her mother the day he left.

“Once you read this, you’ll have a much needed understanding of why he left. I probably should’ve let you read this a long time ago, but I didn’t think you were ready for it. I thought you were too young to understand. But it seems my little girl has grown up without me even knowing it.” Karen carefully put the infamous Peter Marshall letter into Joanna’s hands.

Joanna held the letter tenderly, as if it were the key to her past as well as her future.

“Thank you, I don’t know what to say.”

“Save your ‘thank you’ for after you’ve read the letter. Just remember this; no matter what it says in that letter, your father does love you. He just doesn’t, or maybe I should say didn’t, know how to express it. In a way, your father was too young to deal with the responsibilities that a family brings. Maybe this is why he wants to see you now. I’m going to leave now, so you can read it. Goodnight dear, and don’t stay up too late. You’ll want to look your best for tomorrow.” Karen gave her daughter a kiss on the head, which was filled with all of the love and protection that only a mother could give.

Chapter 9

Joanna held the letter in her hands, at first not sure that she wanted to read its contents. She carefully stroked the faded blue ink that had been penned by her father so long ago. She took a deep breath and began reading the letter.

Dear Karen,

I can’t take seeing my friends day after day, knowing that they know how much of a failure I am. Do you know what it is like, being a man and having your wife do everything for you? You won’t let me do any-

thing. You pay the bills, you handle all of the money, and you even get mad at me if I want to go out and have a few drinks. Karen, you just don’t understand how much pressure I have on me. You don’t even have control over the kids. When I get home, they are always jumping around all over the place. I’m tired when I come home. I don’t need to hear their yelling all of the time. I need peace and quiet. This is why you hardly ever see me. You know that I never really wanted kids, but you kept on insisting. This is not to say that I don’t love them because I do. I just don’t know how to act around them. I don’t know how to make you understand how I feel. You are never there for me. You always complain about being tired. What about me and my needs? I just can’t take this anymore. I don’t want to hurt you or the kids, but I feel if I stay, I will. I also don’t want to be a failure to you or the kids, but I am. Our children don’t deserve to know me unless I can change and make myself a better person for them. You will only hear from me if this day comes, only when and if I’m able to change my ways, and if I can make you proud of me and not ashamed, which I know you are. I know you will be fine, and you will be able to handle things better without me. I will come back someday when I have things straightened out. Until then, please know that I do this out of love.

—Peter

Joanna was stunned by the letter that she had just read. She couldn’t believe her own father hadn’t really wanted her and couldn’t deal with her. She remembered back to the day he left. “Maybe if I hadn’t tried to jump in his arms after he came home from work, we would still be a family,” she thought. But she realized that no matter what she had done, it was her father who had the problems, and the responsibility rested with him. Joanna went back to bed that night with tears in her eyes as she thought about the contents of her father’s letter. She wondered how anyone could be so selfish.

Chapter 10

Joanna parked her car a few short blocks away from the coffee shop where she was supposed to meet him. She got out of the car and walked towards the coffee shop. The nervousness was increasing with each step she took. She stopped just short of the door and peered into the window. Joanna saw a bunch of old ladies with wide brimmed hats

chatting about some important news. Probably about their latest visit to the doctor, she guessed. At the next table, she saw a man and a woman holding each other's hands and smiling while they were drinking their coffee. At a table over in the corner, Joanna saw a man sitting there all alone reading the newspaper. She wondered if this man could be her father. She took the picture she had of him out of her pocket. In it, he looked young. With reddish brown hair and brown eyes, he looked healthy and strong. This man at the table had his back to her, so she could not tell if it was he or not. Joanna moved away from the window and opened the door. The door's bell gave a little ding to announce her entrance. When she walked in, no one looked up. She could hear one of the old ladies talking about her gallbladder being removed, and the two lovers were still happily staring into each other's eyes. The man who sat in the corner seemed not to take notice of anything.

Joanna walked up to the table and said, "Excuse me, sir, could you be...."

The man looked up at her, not saying a word; he just smiled.

Joanna noticed that his skin was wrinkling and dry, his hair was a silver gray, and as his hand rested on the table, she noticed a golden wedding ring. Joanna decided that this could not be her father. "Sorry to interrupt you, sir. I just thought that maybe you could have been my father."

In his gruff and hearty voice, the man said, "Darlin' I wish I could be a father to a pretty girl like you, but I'm old enough to be your grandpa," then went back to reading his paper.

With disappointment, Joanna went over to the counter to order a cup of coffee for herself. She was just about to pay the man behind the counter when a deep voice behind her said, "I'll pay for that."

Joanna looked up and saw a man staring at her. He looked like he was in his late forties, and his hair was turning slightly gray at the sides.

The man smiled at her nervously and said her name. "Joanna?" he asked inquisitively. "I just thought you might be my daughter because you're the youngest one in the place, but if I'm wrong, I'm awfully sorry."

"Oh, um, yes, I'm Joanna. Are you my father, or, um, Peter?" Joanna hadn't even thought about what she should call him. Maybe he didn't want her to call him 'Dad.'

"Yes, Joanna. I'm Peter, and even though I don't think I deserve it, if you want to call me 'Dad,' you can," he said as he pulled out a chair for her to sit in.

"Honestly I don't know what I want to call you—I...." Joanna was sorry as soon as she had said that. She did not want to appear rude or ungrateful that he had come to meet her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It's just that I'm kind of nervous. I don't know what to say."

"It's quite alright. If I were in your position, I think I would say a hell of a lot worse than that. We can decide what you're going call me later. For now, just call me 'Pete'." Peter smiled, hoping it might put his daughter at ease. His *daughter*. That thought warmed his soul. He couldn't believe that this was actually happening or how beautiful she was. She looked exactly like her mother. "I can't believe how grown up you look. I keep thinking of you as my little girl," Peter said as he fished around in his pocket for something.

Joanna didn't like it how he called her 'my little girl.' How could he say that? He doesn't even know me. "Well it has been along time since we've seen each other," Joanna replied as she stirred the straw around in her coffee.

"So you drink coffee with a straw, too. Your mother could never understand why I did that."

Joanna interrupted him. "It's because you can taste the sweetness of the sugar better, isn't it?" She bent down to take a sip of her coffee. Joanna felt glad that she had some minor connection with her father, even if it was only drinking coffee with a straw. There I go again, she thought. *My father*. It sounded strange to her ears. "Ah, here it is," Joanna heard Peter say. "I keep this with me always. I have one of your brothers too." Joanna looked to see what he was handing her and saw that it was a picture of herself in a little blue dress with her hair done up in pigtails.

"If you hadn't left us, then you wouldn't need to carry around these pictures all of the time. Why did you do it? Didn't you know that we needed you—that I needed you?" Joanna heard herself say.

She saw Peter's face grow somber, and he grew fidgety as if he

did not know how to answer her questions. He slid his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. His eyes met directly with hers, and he said, "I was afraid. I was scared. I didn't have a job." He was silent for a moment and then continued. "I didn't want you and your brothers to know how much of a failure I had become. I became depressed and started turning to booze. I couldn't take the fact that your mother could earn more money than me. I decided it was best for me to leave before I took my frustrations out on you and your brothers. I'm sorry. My intentions were not to hurt you." Joanna saw that he looked partially relieved that he had gotten it off of his chest. But she felt that she could not let him off that easily.

"Well, you did, a lot. Do you know what it's like growing up with only one parent? To know that your other parent left of his own free will? To see your brother grow up faster than he should have? To hear your mother crying herself to sleep night after night? To be four years old and realize that the reason Daddy left you is because he doesn't love you anymore? The only reason we've thought of you as a failure is because you didn't stay and try to get help. It would have worked out. I know it would have." Silenced followed after Joanna's heart wrenching testimony.

"Joanna, that isn't true. I did love you. That's why I left. It wasn't just because of the fact that I couldn't find a job. It was other things, too," was Peter's anguishing reply.

"No, if you loved me you would have stayed. You would have gotten help. If you had only tried to deal with not being able to find a job. You could've let Mom work until you got back on your feet. But you didn't. All you cared about is yourself and your stubborn pride. Your pride got in the way of your love for us. Because if you really loved us, then you would've stayed. You would have done anything to keep our family together." As Joanna looked at Peter, she saw that his face was full of sadness. Maybe she had been a little too hard on him. But after all the pain he had caused her, why should she feel guilty about causing him a little pain in return, she thought.

"Joanna, I was wrong. All I can say is that I'm sorry. I shouldn't even be asking you this, but I was hoping that maybe you could give me a second chance, a chance to make things right between us. So that I can make up for lost time. I really want to get to know you. I know I

messed up my chance of truly being a father to you and your brothers. But maybe you could let me become a close friend?" her father asked, slowly reaching for his daughter's hand.

Joanna pulled her hand back. She didn't want to give in that easily, but she didn't want to chase him away again either. "Why, all of a sudden, do you want to be friends? In the letter that you wrote before you left, you said you didn't even want children. How can you be my friend if you didn't want me?"

"Joanna, when I wrote that, I wasn't in the right frame of mind. I did want you and your brothers. I just didn't know how to provide for you. I didn't know how to meet your needs before mine. I was a very selfish individual, and in some ways, I still am. I have come a long way, but I still have a lot further to go. I attend therapy now for depression and for alcoholism. Since my life is becoming somewhat organized again, I thought it would be a good time to meet you. I know that even the relationship of friendship will be hard at first because relationships are built on trust, and I haven't given you much to build on. I'm asking for a chance. I know I'm asking for a lot, but I was just hoping."

Joanna looked at the pitiful expression on his face. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him. "You're right. It will be hard for me to trust you, but I'll give you the chance to gain my trust. And who knows? Maybe, someday, Michael and Chris will give you that chance too." Joanna looked up at the clock on the wall and noticed that it was almost three o'clock. "We'll have to schedule another meeting though because I have to be somewhere at three thirty."

"I want to thank you for giving me this chance. You don't know how much it means to me," Peter said, smiling at her.

"It's a chance for both of us to get to know each other. I'll call you later in the week to set up another meeting. Thank you for coming, Peter."

They walked out of the coffee shop together, said their good-byes, then each walked their separate ways. Joanna stopped to watch Peter as he walked down the street. He walked with his head turned down, his shoulders slumped, and he looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Her eyes followed him until he disappeared into the bustle of people and she could see him no more.

Joanna realized that even if her father had stayed in their lives, it wouldn't have been perfect. There is never a time when life is perfect. Everyone's life has its imperfections, problems, and tribulations. Life may be perfect for a moment or an instant, and when it is, you should hold on to that moment and never let it go.

Carousel Horses

By Cara Driscoll

I remember
(Only slightly)
The vision of my mother

And my father
(Together laughing)
As they placed me and my brother

(Together laughing)
On two vibrant
Carousel horses.

Round and round,
Up and down,

Shades of brown, white, and pink
Stand out in my mind.
Grasping the pole for dear life,

I felt as if I was going to fly
Right out into the blue sky.
My heart beating fast,

My face full of smiles
I remember (only slightly).

Walking Away

By Nicole Asselin

iridescent
sparkling
shimmering
glinting
glittering
gazing
staring
eyes

sharply
piercing
stinging
breaking
weakening
my back

as I turn

tripping
falling
running
tumbling
dreaming
wondering

what
could
should
would
happen

if only

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